This article introduces the situation of peasants in China since 1959, focusing on the main forms of their collective action against capital and the state since the mid-1990s, based on news reports, academic studies, and some direct observations.1 In Part 1, I define “peasant” and outline the main ways in which postsocialist2 Chinese peasants have acted collectively against capitalist extraction and exclusion. In Part 2, I use this framework to summarize the main trends of peasant resistance from 1959 to the present. I tentatively argue that many of China’s “peasant struggles” since the mid-2000s — including many of the land conflicts accounting for 65% of China’s 180,000 “mass incidents” in 20103 — have acquired the character of (semi-)proletarian negotiations over the social wage, comparable to recent anti-austerity mobilizations in Europe. While almost all of these conflicts have remained localistic and narrowly-defined, their participants’ more proletarianized conditions, and the greater dominance of the capitalist value-form even in remote villages, may be increasing the material possibilities for such mobilizations to link up with the ever-brewing strikes and riots that periodically disrupt the urban areas where most of these “peasants” now live and work.

I. Postsocialist Chinese Peasants vs. Capital

A. Why “peasant”?

I use the term “peasant” with some hesitation because today’s peasants – in China and probably everywhere else – are quite different from those theorized and mobilized by the likes of Marx, Makhno, and Mao. Capitalism has thoroughly transformed what it means to be a peasant, arguably beyond recognition. I

1 A revised and expanded version of this article (forthcoming in issue #1 of the Nao journal in December 2014, which will be available on the Nao blog: libcom.org/blog/nao) will go on to analyze this action in relation to contemporary peasant movements in other countries, and to theories that we are entering a global “era of riots.” According to these theories, our era is characterized by a secular crisis of capitalist reproduction, in which capital increasingly excludes the proletarians and semi-proletarian peasants (and foragers, etc.), whom it continues to dispossess, from stable employment as wage-laborers in the formal economy, thereby increasing the importance of quasi-self-sufficient villages as Bantustans for warehousing capital’s “surplus population,” and decreasing the possibilities for conventional models of class struggle based on the wage relation. Is this tendency true in China? If so — or if it becomes so following China’s long-predicted crash — then how are China’s peasants and ex-peasants confronting this situation, how is the state responding, and how should we intervene?

2 I date China’s “socialist” era from approximately 1956 to 1978, the transition to capitalism from 1978 to 1992, and China’s complete subsumption under the capitalist law of value after 1992. My use of the term “socialism” differs from both Maoist accounts (which regard “socialism” as a transition to communism defeated by “capitalist roaders”) and left-communist accounts (which regard China’s Mao-era “socialism” as a form of capitalism). Instead, I regard “socialism” as a distinct mode of production in which the capitalist law of value operated only indirectly, via military competition with capitalist states, distorted and countervailed by others elements of the socialist system that had to be gradually overcome in order for the value-form to achieve dominance. For a detailed analysis of this “socialist mode of production” and its relation to capitalism, see issue #1 of the Nao journal.

3 According to a widely-cited study by sociologist Sun Liping, discussed below. Other recent studies have come up with drastically different figures, with land conflicts accounting for as low as 22% of mass incidents.
still find the term useful, however, not only because “peasant” (nongmin) is still a salient identity in China (like campesino in much of Latin America, for example), but more importantly, because this term highlights the institutional separation between urban and rural hukou (household registration, explained below) – in ways that resonate with what might be called the “semi-proletarian peasant condition” in other countries today. In this section, I explain two overlapping senses of “peasant” that can help us make sense of many conflicts in postsocialist China:

(1) In a broad sense specific to China, “peasant” could indicate anyone with a rural hukou, whom I will call “ruralites” to avoid confusion (since “rural resident” implies regular residence in a rural village, whereas many ruralites live in urban areas most of the time, and many are uncertain whether they will settle there or eventually return to their villages, where most of their parents and many of their children still live). The hukou system is similar to apartheid or national citizenship, excluding ruralites from certain rights enjoyed by urbanites (people with urban hukou), but also granting ruralites the right to use collective village resources such as farmland. In 2012, such ruralites accounted for between 60 and 70 percent of China’s population, between 800 and 950 million people. Over 200 million of those ruralites are urban residents, in that they spend most of their time in urban areas, mainly working for wages or running small businesses.

(2) In classic sociological and anthropological definitions, “peasant” refers more specifically to households (not individuals) with access to small plots of farmland used for tilling with household labor, for household use, usually in addition to sale, rent, and/or taxes. According to such definitions, peasants are not capitalist farmers because they do not use their land as capital or run their “farms” as enterprises. They are not fully proletarian, since they have access to means of subsistence and use it for household reproduction, but they are often semi-proletarian, since they depend at least partly on the wages or informal income of some family members. In this sense, China’s “peasants” would number much less than the 800+ million ruralites, according to my analysis, although some sociologists estimate the numbers to be about the same.

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4 For a brief introduction to the hukou system, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hukou_system](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hukou_system). For a recent in-depth study, see Luo Rumin, Becoming Urban: State and Migration in Contemporary China (Kassel University Press, 2014).

5 Two methods of calculating this number are explained here: [http://blog.tianya.cn/blogger/post_read.asp?BlogID=14642&PostID=43522365](http://blog.tianya.cn/blogger/post_read.asp?BlogID=14642&PostID=43522365). Note that the number of people with rural hukou is much higher than the number of “rural residents” based on where people normally lived at the time of the 2011 census, state reports on which proudly proclaimed that China’s urban population (50.3%) had finally surpassed its rural population (49.7%).

6 This difference is more obvious in Chinese than in English: “peasant” is nongmin and “(capitalist) farmer” is nongchangzhu – literally, the owner of a “farm” (nongchang). Nongchang refers only to capitalist or state-owned farms, never to those of peasants, which can only be called “land” or “fields.” Even when a peasant rents land from other peasants and hires a few poorer peasants for seasonal wage-labor, he is still called a nongmin. Nongchangzhu refers only to the manager of a state-owned farm or an urban capitalist who obtains large tracts of land and regularly employs a formal workforce. This terminological distinction masks the actual continuum between capitalist farmers and the more commercially-oriented “peasant” farmers.

7 Sociologist He Xuefeng’s 2006 estimate of the number of China’s “peasants” (in something like my second definition above) was about the same as the 2011 number of people with rural hukou: “most migrant workers counted as urban [in the 2005 census] cannot afford to raise their children or retire in the city, even if they wanted to. Instead they leave their children in the village and eventually
There has long been a grey area between peasant and capitalist farmer – a greyness that may point to problems with this concept, but which also reflects the ambiguous and changing reality of being a peasant under conditions dominated by the capitalist law of value. This reality has been ambiguous since at least the 19th century wherever peasant production continued in a capitalist context. On the one hand, factors such as competition drove peasant households to operate more like capitalist farms. As Marx put it, the peasant comes to embody both capital and labor in one person; in feminist terms, the peasant patriarch embodies capital, while the women and children embody labor, but usually without the wage relation.\(^8\) Peasant households were thus compelled to specialize in a few commercial crops, and to take out loans in order to hire seasonal labor and buy the industrial inputs (equipment, fuel, fertilizer, etc.) that became increasingly necessary for competitive production on the capitalist market. At the same time, other sources of cash (handicrafts, household processing of agricultural products) became less viable as capital expanded into these spheres, and many peasant households also became increasingly dependent on income from the migrant wage-labor of one or more members. Since the 19th century, therefore, peasant households that have not fully proletarianized or converted to capitalist agriculture have managed to reproduce themselves by adapting to their capitalist context in other ways, combining multiple subsistence strategies within the same household. Of course the peasant condition has varied from place to place and changed with the development of peasants’ relation to agribusiness, but there is enough commonality among these situations to warrant the general term “peasant,” or – in the increasingly universal situation of dependence on migrant wage-labor or informal income – “the semi-proletarian peasant condition.”

Although some peasants try to become capitalist farmers (in the rare situations where farming seems an easier way for peasants to make money than migrant wage-labor or business), there are often institutional obstacles to such a transition, and when they are overcome, the household’s condition usually changes to the point that it no longer makes sense to use the term “peasant.” In China, the hukou system is probably the biggest obstacle, as well as a convenient dividing line between “peasant” (in the sociological sense) and “capitalist.” On the one hand, urbanites receive preferential treatment for state services such as school and healthcare, and until recently, ruralites were also subject to greater extraction of surplus products or value – directly by the state through taxes and fees, forced underpaid labor during the socialist era, and postsocialist expropriation of resources (such as land grabs and privatization of collective enterprises); and indirectly, first

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\(^8\) For example, see Hill Gates, *China’s Motor: A Thousand Years of Petty Capitalism* (Cornell University Press, 1996).
by the state’s “price scissors” during the socialist era, then by capital’s “unequal exchange” on the postsocialist markets for credit, agricultural inputs and products. (Following state policy reforms in the mid-2000s, some forms of extraction have disappeared, but two remain prominent: “unequal exchange” and direct expropriation through land grabs and pollution, discussed below.)

The hukou system has thus made it difficult for ruralites to become capitalist – with the exception of those ruralites with personal connections in the local party-state, which they have used to convert collective land, equipment, or enterprises into their own private property. On the other hand, as soon as such well-connected ruralites acquire such property and convert it into capital, it usually becomes possible for them to buy housing in the city and obtain an urban hukou, thereby giving their children access to better schooling and health care. Even those few rural capitalists who keep their rural hukou are not bound to it in the same way as ordinary ruralites, so they cannot be called “peasants” in either sense of the term.

Although the hukou system is no longer as important as it was from the 1960s through the mid-2000s (due to the combination of policy reforms, increased ease of obtaining urban hukou, and the increased commoditization of food, housing, and social services), it still functions both negatively and positively to divide the Chinese population, somewhat as the apartheid system did in South Africa, or as national borders still do on a global scale. Negatively, the hukou system continues to disadvantage ruralites with regard to certain social services, and the police may send them back to their villages at any time (rarely enforced these days, but still a card that can be played in times of conflict). Positively, a rural hukou also entails the right to use a share of the village’s collective farmland, woodland and fishponds. With the informal commoditization of land and the (legal and illegal) transfer of land-rights for capitalist development, this positive feature of the hukou is eroding, and besides, most young people from the countryside neither know how to farm nor want to learn. However, this right does provide an objective way-out for many ruralites who lose their jobs in the city (as 23 million did in the financial crisis of 2008 – although most ended up finding new jobs within the next few months), who get injured or sick, or who give up on trying to settle down with their families in the city as they get older. For this reason, Chinese intellectuals and policy-makers refer to collective farmland as “welfare fields” (fulitian), some arguing that they provide a temporary supplement to China’s austere social security system until the state is rich enough to afford “Scandinavian-style social democracy.”

The hukou system thus functions both negatively and positively to divide what may be broadly called “China’s proletariat” – a population that has little access to means of subsistence and is dependent on income from wage-labor or informal activities such as street-vending, trash-picking, or crime. Not all Chinese peasants are (semi-)proletarian, in the sense of depending on income from outside the household farm; some

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9 The recent flight of industrial capital inland (away from the growth of workers’ power in coastal centers) and the state-supported development of smaller cities, rural transportation, and agribusiness may also increase the attractiveness of living in the countryside and commuting to jobs nearby, while older family members farm and raise their grandchildren.
are relatively self-sufficient and make enough money from selling farm products to buy everything else they need, or in any case they don’t seek money elsewhere (for ideological reasons or because they are too old or frail to do so). Others run their farms (often in combination with other small businesses, turning their homes into guesthouses, for example) in ways that come close to capitalist enterprise, yet without achieving the level of profit that would enable them to obtain urban hukou. But most – like most “peasants” anywhere today – are best understood as semi-proletarian, in the sense that they have no means of production except for small plots of land, which they use mainly for subsistence farming (mainly by elder family members raising grandchildren) to supplement the meager income they acquire through wage-labor or informal activities.

Although most Chinese peasants are semi-proletarian, the semi- is important, not only because their hukou divides them from urban proletarians and weakens the potential for oppositional solidarity, but also because they relate to capital in a more complex variety of ways.

B. Peasants & Capital

In postsocialist China, capital expropriates and exploits peasants through the following relations:

1. Direct expropriation of resources (“accumulation by dispossession”\(^{10}\)) via -
   a. land grabs (the most common cause of “mass incidents” from the mid-2000s until 2013)
   b. pollution (externalization of the costs of capitalist production in ways that destroy peasants’ resources; the most common cause of “mass incidents” in 2013)
   c. privatization of collective village facilities and enterprises (mainly in the 1980s-1990s)
   d. a portion of government taxes and fees (legally or illegally) converted into capital through investment into private and capitalistically-run “collective” enterprises (until the mid-2000 reforms abolished rural taxes and fees);

2. “Unequal exchange”\(^{11}\) on the markets for -
   a. credit (i.e. interest paid to banks)

\(^{10}\) See note in Part 2 about “accumulation by dispossession.” According to David Harvey, this does not extract surplus-value but merely forestalls crisis by decreasing the cost of means of production.

\(^{11}\) This is a term from the “peasant studies” literature. See, for example, Hamza Alavi, “Peasantry and Capitalism: A Marxist Discourse,” in Peasants and Peasant Societies, edited by Teodor Shanin (Blackwell, 1987). It is comparable to the Preobrazhenskian “price scissors” during the socialist era, except that it is determined not by state fiat but by the relative bargaining power of peasants vs. capitalists on these markets. In my understanding, this relation between peasants and capital differs from that between, for example, industrial capitalists, landlords, and retailers, in that it does not merely divide the profit extracted from wage-laborers in industrial production, but actually extracts surplus-value from peasant labor.
b. agricultural inputs (monopoly prices for patented seed, livestock varieties, agro-chemicals, equipment, etc.)

c. the sale of peasants’ agricultural products to middlemen, capitalistically-run “co-ops,” food companies, logistics companies, retailers (the peasants get a tiny share of the price paid by consumers; most is skimmed off by these other links in the commodity chain)

d. rent for farmland (unusual in China since most peasants farm their own land, but it is becoming more common for companies to lease land from villages and then sublet it back to the villagers or poorer peasants from elsewhere; it also common for ex-peasant landlords in rich coastal areas such as Guangdong to lease their land to poor inland peasants for commercial farming);

3. The wage relation (for members of peasant families working for a wage).

These are also the three main ways in which Chinese peasants relate to capital today that will be explained more historically below. To these should be added the generalized sense in which everyone’s lives are shaped by the capitalist value-form, so that those without sufficient money are excluded from the things they need or (are taught to) desire—exclusion that is defended by state force. For those “surplus” peasants unable or unwilling to obtain sufficient money by farming, wage-labor, or legal business, the most salient way they experience capital during certain periods of their lives may be indirectly, via police enforcement of property relations and social order. In prison, such “surplus” peasants may then contribute directly to capital’s augmentation—through forced labor.

C. Peasants vs. Capital

Postsocialist Chinese peasants have acted collectively against capitalist extraction and exclusion in multiple ways, each corresponding to one of the relations outlined above:

1. Against direct expropriation, peasants petition higher authorities and carry out blockades, riots, and occupations of stolen land and government buildings;

2. Against “unequal exchange,” peasants (as commercial farmers) form co-ops (for finance, farm supply, processing and marketing) and create alternative marketing networks;\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{12}\) In some countries, farmers have raised prices for their products by forming “unions” and going on “strike” – i.e. withholding them from the market until food companies raise the price – but I am not aware of that happening in China, and it seems unlikely, considering the immense plurality of small-scale producers alongside the immense plurality of small-scale middlemen.
3. In the wage relation, workers from peasant households file complaints with state authorities, sue employers, and carry out strikes, go-sloows, sabotage and riots (for example, in workplaces so large that fomenting a riot is easier than organizing a strike, such as Foxconn campuses);

4. Against exclusion, peasants (mainly as “surplus population”) may steal, rob, illegally occupy spaces for living, panhandling or vending, and occasionally riot. (I have no information about how Chinese prisoners have resisted forced labor, but presumably they carry out go-sloows, sabotage, hunger strikes and riots, like prisoners in other countries.)

This is all at an abstract level; below I use this framework to outline the recent history of Chinese peasant struggles (i.e. collective action against capitalist extraction or exclusion). In Part 2, I focus on resistance to expropriation, since that has been the main type of collective action against capital by peasants as such in postsocialist China, and probably for peasants in general. The second category of collective action (co-ops, etc.) is dealt with only in passing, since other studies have demonstrated that such “constructive” action alone tends not toward antagonism with the capital-state nexus and the creation of new social relations, but toward either economic failure or “successful” integration into capitalist circuits, usually accompanied by the internal generation of “alternative” capitalist relations. The fourth category (“surplus population” struggles) is addressed only tentatively, since there is little data available for this type of action as such; instead, we can look only at reported “riots” in general and a few specific incidents that seem to fit this category more clearly. Finally I consider how these different types of struggle relate to one another and to non-peasant action against capital.

II. Chinese Peasant Struggles since 1959

A. Resistance to State Extraction during the Socialist Period (1959-1978)

This overview begins in 1959, the first year of the Great Leap Famine, because that is when a generalized rupture occurred between peasants and the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). Prior to that, since

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14 Another important question to be addressed in the longer version of this article (forthcoming in Nao #1) is whether access to “welfare fields” tends to help or hurt working-class formation in China or the development of collective power among “peasant-workers” in the wage relation.
the late 1920s, poor peasants throughout China began to support the CCP. Many (eventually most) CCP members and even leaders came from the peasantry, and the CCP’s guidance often proved successful in carrying out the struggles with local elites that poor peasants had already attempted unsuccessfully on their own, or wished to attempt. This support for the CCP became more widespread after the Red Army defeated Japan and the Nationalists (KMT) and assumed state power in 1949. Peasant support grew throughout the 1950s as CCP policies (such as land reform and cooperativization), coupled with the end of civil war, led to improvements in living standards for most peasants. All this fell apart with the return of famine in 1959, following the first year of the CCP’s Great Leap Forward campaign.\textsuperscript{15} Many peasants suddenly began to regard the party-state as an alien, extractive and oppressive force, and to act individually or collectively against it by hiding grain from state collectors, stealing from collective fields, looting granaries, going to cities to demand food (\textit{it was partly in response to this that the state instituted the hukou system at this time}), and in some cases taking up armed struggle and local “power seizures.”\textsuperscript{16} The post-Leap retreat to more conservative agrarian policies (partial decollectivization, restoration of markets) mitigated peasant unrest, but the damage was done: henceforth it would be more difficult to mobilize peasants for either mass campaigns or the everyday work of collective farming, ditch-digging, etc. The inefficiency that Dengists and liberals alike attribute to the nature of collective production in general\textsuperscript{17} actually stemmed, in this case, from peasants’ resistance (working slowly on collective land, devoting more energy to private plots, etc.) to state extraction and what they interpreted as alien, often irrational attempts to control the production process. In the 1970s (following more moderate recollectivization in the mid-1960s), many peasants again pushed for partial decollectivization, and others welcomed the Dengist state’s forced decollectivization in the early 1980s – less because of peasants’ inherent individualism or “petty bourgeois mentality,” and more because they wanted less extraction and more control over production.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} For background on the Great Leap Forward and causes of the ensuing famine, see “A Commune in Sichuan?” (http://chinaleftreview.org/?p=294), and \textit{Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China’s Great Leap Forward and Famine}, edited by Manning and Wemheuer (UBC Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{16} On peasant resistance during the GLF, see Manning and Wemheuer (2011); Ralph Thaxton, \textit{Catastrophe and contention in rural China: Mao’s Great Leap Forward famine and the origins of righteous resistance in Da Fo Village} (Cambridge, 2008); and 高王凌, \textit{《人民公社时期中国农民反行为调查》}, 中共党史出版社, 2006.

\textsuperscript{17} Dengists – the followers of Deng Xiaoping, who contested Maoist policies throughout the 1960s-1970s and came to power in 1978, unintentionally initiating China’s transition to capitalism in the name of “market socialism” – argued that collective agriculture in general was inherently inefficient compared to household-managed agriculture based on collective ownership of land on a state-regulated market. Chinese and Western liberals alike tend to go further in arguing that land should be privatized and markets liberalized (including the market for labor-power, which gradually emerged in the 1980s).

\textsuperscript{18} Several elderly peasants have told me that \textit{there would have been no need to decollectivize} if the state simply extracted less grain, offered higher prices, or allowed more control over farming.
B. Resistance to Price Fluctuations during the Period of Transition (mid-1980s to early 1990s)

The early 1980s was a golden age for most Chinese peasants, comparable to the 1950s in optimism and surpassing that in terms of livelihood. Several decades of peace and gradual improvement of food intake combined with post-1968 improvements in rural health care to double life expectancy between 1949 and 1980, and two decades of collective projects to improve rural infrastructure (bringing new land under cultivation, expanding irrigation systems, building roads, etc.) and state modernization of agricultural inputs and techniques (mechanization, production of agro-chemicals and high yield varieties of seed and livestock) finally came to fruition in the late 1970s. This coupled with the first significant state increase in prices for agricultural products (designed to increase popularity for the forced decollectivization and smooth the transition), supplemented by subsidies for peasant entrepreneurs who reorganized their household farms and privatized collective equipment to specialize in certain commodities, leading to the most rapid increase in agricultural productivity and income that China has seen – both for peasants in general and especially for those able to benefit from the entrepreneurial subsidies, from 1978 to 1984.

By the mid-1980s, however, these increases in productivity and income declined due to a combination of factors: the increase in productivity due to modernization on tiny plots of land soon reached its limits, and the state decreased its subsidies and price controls for agriculture in order to balance the budget and lower the price of food for urbanites, and as part of its general strategy of marketization. The marketization of prices in the mid-1980s spelled disaster for some peasants who specialized in certain cash crops when prices fell below the cost of production. This led to the first significant round of peasant unrest in China since the Great Leap Famine, throughout the late 1980s. There is little data available on this sequence of struggles due to media censorship and the preference of researchers to focus on either decollectivization in the early 1980s or anti-corruption struggles in the 1990s, but it is memorialized in Mo Yan’s novel *The Garlic Ballads*. Based on news reports and interviews, the novel recounts a 1987 uprising against the falling price of garlic and the government’s refusal to buy the surplus, after local officials had encouraged peasants to specialize in garlic and then pocketed the state subsidies, along with fees they charged for farming a cash crop instead of grain. If this case is any indication, the re-marketization of agriculture at this time was already intertwined with local state corruption, which became the focus of peasant resistance in the 1990s.

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19 For an in-depth comparative study of these changes (which, despite the book’s title, is also critical on some key points), see Chris Bramall, *In Praise of Maoist Economic Planning: Living Standards and Economic Development in Sichuan since 1931* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

20 There is also evidence of some peasant unrest during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1968) and its aftermath, but this seems to have mainly taken the form of localistic factional disputes.

21 Translated by Howard Goldblatt (Viking Press, 1995).
C. Resistance to Local State Expropriation in the 1990s and early 2000s

Despite frequent (but often inaccurate) news reporting and a sizable academic literature on “rightful resistance,” anti-dam movements, etc., the only attempt at a comprehensive history of Chinese peasant struggles since the 1980s that I am aware of is a pair of articles by Kathy Le Mons Walker published in 2006 and 2008,\(^{22}\) so this section mainly summarizes information from those articles, supplementing it with some additional sources.

It was also during this period that many young peasants began migrating to coastal cities for wage labor – in response to this expropriation in the countryside alongside increasing employment opportunities in the Special Economic Zones, on the one hand, and declining returns from agriculture after the limits of modernization on small plots were reached, on the other. The *struggles of peasants* thus began to split into the “peasant struggles” as such dealt with here, and the struggles of *peasants as semi-proletarians*, including struggles in the wage relation and riots against social exclusion.

What is ‘Corruption’?

In Walker’s (2006) list of “common themes” of peasant resistance from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, most could be characterized as direct expropriation or, as Walker puts it, “accumulation by dispossession.”\(^{23}\) These include:

- the issuing of IOUs in lieu of payment of cash for crops by local officials, who used the funds for speculative real estate and business deals…;
- cadre diversion of state-allocated inputs for agriculture;
- the pocketing of TVE [“collective” township and village enterprise] profits by local and mid-level cadres;
- the imposition by local cadres of a host of ‘illegal’ or ‘unaccounted for’ fines, fees, and taxes to pay for ‘development’ projects and/or for personal use; the forcible confiscation of the land, belongings, and food of peasants who could not or would not pay the extra taxes and fees; the expropriation of arable land without adequate compensation (for highways, real estate development, and personal use, or to attract industrial investors through the creation of ‘development zones’);

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\(^{23}\) Walker adopts the term “accumulation by dispossession” from David Harvey (*The New Imperialism*, 2003), describing capital’s use of direct expropriation as opposed to the wage relation. According to Harvey, this is mainly a way for capital to cut down on the cost of resources for capitalist production during periods of low profitability. It could be understood as a way that capital tries to avoid the consequences of its own law of value (i.e. crisis and devalorization) by breaking or bending that law (i.e. by stealing or buying resources below their value, usually with the aid of state force). It appears similar to “primitive accumulation,” but it functions differently once the capitalist mode of production has become well-established. See note 4 above for an explanation of “accumulation by dispossession.”
issuing of inferior and fake chemical fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, and other supplies by corrupt cadres; and finally the pollution of local water supplies by development projects, which has not only angered peasants but affected agricultural production as well.

Such expropriation, from the mid-1980s until most of these practices were abolished in the mid-2000s, was not mere “corruption,” “tribute,” or “state involution,” but – in some cases, at least – specifically capitalist extraction of surplus-value, to the extent that it transferred value from peasant labor into capitalist enterprise or development projects that provided the infrastructure necessary for such enterprise. Often this investment took the form of “collectively-owned” TVEs, but many of these actually functioned as capitalist enterprises, while others were eventually appropriated by their managers or cheaply purchased by capitalists. During China’s reintegration into the world market in the 1990s, these privatized TVEs became the main vehicle through which Chinese and transnational capital exploited local and migrant peasant-workers – whose expropriation pushed them into such jobs.25

“All Power to the Peasants”: The Heyday of Autonomous Collective Action

According to Walker (2006), “In the mid-1980s when the protests first began, many took the form of acts of ‘revenge’ [baofu] or violence directed at local cadres, the newly wealthy in villages (often also cadres), and tax collectors,” such as “the beating of cadres and their families” and “the destruction of property by arson.” In 1988, “more than 5,000 cases of ‘violent’ tax resistance involving injuries and the death of tax collectors had occurred over a two-year period.” Throughout the 1990s, such “tactical use of ‘revenge’ against corrupt, ‘bourgeois’ cadres increased in scope and intensity,” while increasingly taking more collective forms. In 1993, for example, “15,000 angry peasants in Renshou County in western Sichuan rose in response to the increasingly arbitrary and high fees imposed by local cadres.” During this six-month uprising, the peasants “blockaded traffic, held police officers hostage, set police cars ablaze, attacked officials, rampaged through government offices and marched en masse through town streets, nearby mountains and fields and on local highways carrying pitchforks, rods, and banners.” The same year in Guangdong, “several thousand


25 To be clear, not all such extraction could reasonably be called “capitalist” in the 1990s. Much of it did not differ qualitatively from pre-capitalist modes of extraction, functioning primarily to fund the salaries and extravagant personal expenditures of the local bureaucracy (“state involution”), or to finance state projects that could not be simply lined up with capitalist interests (“tribute” or “primitive socialist accumulation”). However, in the increasingly globalized market dominated by the law of value, such extraction became integrated into processes of capital accumulation, so the bureaucracy became compelled to channel the surplus it extracted into capitalist production, and – sometimes directly (through labor recruitment projects) – to channel peasants into wage-labor.
peasants blocked a major highway with trucks to protest the expropriation of their fields for a highway improvement project.” Several major actions occurred that year in Anhui. In one such action,

[A]n ‘Autonomous Peasant Committee’ seized members of a work team from the county party committee and demanded a 50 percent tax reduction, the dismissal of a township head and party committee, and the dissolution of the township militia... [300] members of the committee attacked the county government building. Also in Anhui, more than 2,000 peasants from seven villages organized against both the issuing of IOUs and government payment for crops in material rather than cash. At their meetings they ‘openly’ displayed banners that contained such slogans as ‘All power to the peasants!’ and ‘Down with the new landlords of the 1990s!’

According to Walker, it was in response to such unrest that the central party-state leadership increased its efforts to implement “villager self-government,” i.e. democratic election of “villager committees” – the lowest level of de facto government, which had usually been appointed by the lowest de jure level, known as “commune” in the socialist era (1958 through early 1980s), and “township” thereafter (although in theory they had always been democratically elected). At first, few peasants showed interest in these elections, seeing them as little more than a formality, but over time, central authorities’ promotion of “villager self-government” enabled Beijing to portray itself “as an ally and protector of peasant interests and, thereby, both potentially minimize opposition to its own policies and suggest that the real problem lay with local officialdom” (Walker 2006:9). When elections failed to curb the growing unrest, Beijing issued new regulations. In 1992, the central government “prohibited local governments from levying taxes and fees at rates greater than 5 percent of the average net income in a village,” sending an “Urgent Circular” to all rural officials “instructing them to comply immediately so as to ‘ease the burden’ on peasants” (Walker 2006:10). In 1993, central leaders “wrote provisions into a new Law on Agriculture that gave peasants the legal right to ‘refuse’ to pay excessive or unauthorized fees and taxes.” “The government’s tacit support for the peasants seems to have been mostly ignored by local gangster capitalists whom Beijing found increasingly difficult to supervise or control,” but it did influence the mode of peasant resistance and contribute to its proliferation after 1993. That year saw an upsurge in recorded “protests and risings” to 8,700 cases, many invoking these two new policies in what Li

26 Walker borrows the term “gangster capitalism” from He Qinglian to describe “the plundering of public wealth by power-holders and their hangers-on,” or what He calls “the marketization of power.” He Qinglian had coined this term to argue that China’s transformation differed from a preferable norm of “Western” capitalism. This resonates with denunciations of neoliberalism, common on the contemporary global left, such as Naomi Klein’s influential notion of “disaster capitalism.” However, as Marx noted and others such as David Harvey have elaborated, “accumulation by dispossession” has been the norm of capitalism since its origins in early modern European colonial plunder and domestic enclosures – a global norm that has arguably become more salient since the 1970s, now as a fix to the crisis of overaccumulation, and as a assertion of bourgeois and state power in response to the proletarian and peasant unrest of the 1950s-1970s (including in “socialist” countries such as China). Capitalism – based primarily on the less dramatic dispossession that takes place every day through the wage relation (and for peasants, through “unequal exchange”) – cannot function without occasional supplementation by “gangsters,” “corruption,” and “disasters.”
and O’Brien27 call “policy-based” or “rightful” resistance: “peasants’ practice of defending their ‘legitimate rights and interests’ by citing laws, policies, and other official communications to challenge over-taxation and the excessive use of force, to demand the dismissal of corrupt cadres and greater accountability, or to protest against rigged elections and call for the repeal of ‘local policies.’” Henceforth, peasants began to articulate their resistance to expropriation in terms of “rights defense” (weiquan), and to call their oppositional collectives “rights-defense organizations.”

The 1993 Sichuan riot mentioned above, for example, “started when, soon after its promulgation, local peasants invoked the 5 percent limit to resist paying fees for a highway construction project the county was trying to impose.” After several hundred peasants burned a police vehicle and marched on the county seat, a national newspaper ran an article supporting the peasants, “charging that Renshou officials were defying the ‘Urgent Circular’ by imposing new levies and attempting to conceal central directives from the local population”; “Peasant leaders made more than 1,000 copies of the article, which they posted on walls and roads and sold to villagers. Reportedly emboldened by the ‘support’ of the central newspaper, the growing numbers of participants moved on the county party committee (more than 40 cadres were beaten), attacked the county government offices, and destroyed numerous vehicles.” Needless to say, the central authorities had precipitated more than they bargained for. “Contingency plans were… laid in the event that the protest resulted in the toppling of the county leadership. In that event, the ‘riot’ was to be redefined as a rebellion and crushed ‘at all costs’” by an army unit “that was mobilized and ready to move” (Walker 2006:11).

With the combination of this new posture of support from the central party-state and the development of class antagonism, after 1993 “rural society grew further out of control. In some places resistance assumed a more radically militant form, resulting in ‘paralyzed’ and ‘run-away’ villages where local cadres were killed and the rural administration either ceased or turned wholly away from state extraction and policy implementation” (Walker 2006:12). This foreshadows the famous Siege of Wukan Village in 2011, discussed below. Wukan, however, seems tame in comparison to the uprisings of the late 1990s, characterized by “greater militarization and an openly insurgent politics, including the formation of dissident organizations and paramilitary forces,” such as the Chongqing “Anti-Corruption Army of the People, Workers and Peasants.” In the larger rebellions of 1997 (in Anhui, Henan, Hubei, and Jiangxi), respectively 70,000, 200,000, 120,000, and 200,000 participants “attacked government buildings, took party secretaries hostage, burned government vehicles, wrecked roads, commandeered government cement and fertilizer, and in at least two instances seized guns and ammunition” (Walker 2008:470).

27 Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, Rightful Resistance in Rural China (Cambridge University Press, 2006).
In response to this worsening situation in the late 1990s, “the party-state stepped up efforts to both defuse the rural movement and reign in local gangster capitalists” (Walker 2006:13). First in 1998, “under the rubric of expanding ‘democratic decision making’ in the rural areas, it revised the 1987 regulations on village committee elections.” At the same time, however, it “strengthened the role of local party committees to whom village officials are answerable,” while also implementing “a new programme of increased repression and control” which “jettisoned the tolerance it had shown in the 1980s and 1990s for rural protest that remained small-scaled, targeted only local leaders, and did not assume explicitly political form” (Walker 2008:470). This new program included “greater use of armed police, paramilitary troops, tear gas and other weapons, more frequent arrests… the formation of specialized, heavily armed riot police units stationed in 36 cities, and the creation of 30,000 new police stations in rural areas for both control and surveillance” (Walker 2008:471).

When the “deepening” of “village democracy” proved insufficient as a carrot of legitimacy to balance the stick of repression, central leaders “put forward a new ‘strategic line’ on rural and urban development” in 2000, announcing that “‘protecting’ peasants’ interests and rights had now become a top priority.” This shift in rural development strategy – which culminated in the abolition of most rural taxes and fees and the launching of the “New Socialist Countryside” (NSC) campaign in 2006 – corresponded to what Day calls China’s “the third wave” of post-Mao intellectual debates on “the figure of the peasant” in Chinese development. All three waves (the first centered on the decollectivization of agriculture in the early 1980s, the second on the development and globalization of TVEs in the early 1990s) concerned questions such as: “Was the peasantry going to disappear, be integrated into a new Chinese capitalism, or form an excluded class, marginalized and continually disruptive?” (Day 2013:6)

This third wave began in the late 1990s in response to the surge of rural unrest. At first most intellectuals framed the problem in terms of “the peasants’ burden” (nongmin fudan), generally limited to “excessive” taxes and fees caused by the corruption of local officials. Gradually more sophisticated analysis took shape, such as Wen Tiejun’s reformulation of the contemporary sannong wenti, or “rural problem in three dimensions” (peasants, villages, and agriculture or rural production) as caused by the commoditization of land, labor, and money after three decades of “primitive socialist accumulation” (industrialization fueled by state extraction of surplus from peasant labor), conditioned by China’s semi-peripheral position in the modern

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28 In contrast with the liberal belief (common among both Chinese liberals and Western sinologists and journalists) that “free enterprise” leads to the development of “civil society,” which then leads to “democratization,” in fact we see that the state combines formal democratization with increasing repression of autonomous social relations in order to promote capitalist enterprise.


30 As Day discusses, this response to peasant unrest echoed the emergence of debates about social revolution around 1907 in response to the preceding decade of peasant unrest.
world. On this intellectual foundation there emerged a social movement known as “New Rural Reconstruction” (NRR), viewed as an alternative or compliment to the party-state’s responses to peasant unrest. NRR sought to channel this unrest into “constructive” projects aimed at reversing the dissolution of village communities and the flow of young people to the city, centered on peasant co-ops, alternative marketing networks, and “cultural” activities (performing arts troupes, old people’s clubs, etc.).

NRR and NSC also both responded to fears that China might be headed for an economic crisis following the Asian financial crisis of 1997, growing instability in the world economy after 2000, and signs that China’s productive capacity was outpacing its capacity for consumption. In addition to gradually eliminating rural taxes and fees, therefore, a major concern of new policies such as NSC was to increase rural consumption through means such as subsidizing peasant consumption of household appliances and improving infrastructure, e.g. building and widening roads and transferring peasants into more modern housing complexes – thus also freeing up land to be used in either capitalist agriculture or more real estate development.

D. Continued Resistance to Land Grabs & Pollution since the mid-2000s

Background: Land Conflicts in the 1990s and early 2000s

The ongoing round of land grabs, which critics call China’s contemporary “enclosure movement” (quandi yundong), could be dated back to Beijing’s gradual relaxation of land management policies starting in the late 1980s and the ensuing “frenzy over land enclosure” in the coastal Special Economic Zones such as Shenzhen. According to Walker (2008:471), “In the early 1990s, 90 per cent of all direct foreign investment flowed into the newly opened land market,” in which local officials (legally or illegally) evicted peasants and leased the land to foreign capital for industrial and commercial development. In the late 1990s this “frenzy” spread inland due to the combination of accelerated urbanization and the development of China’s new real estate market, on the one hand, and Beijing’s increasing restrictions on rural taxes and fees, on the other, which pushed local governments to pursue other sources of revenue. As a result, 1.8 million hectares of arable land were lost to development between 1986 and 1995, followed by 8 million hectares between 1996 and 2004, according to official figures. “In the brief span of 20 years, then, China experienced an ‘enclosure movement’ of unprecedented proportion worldwide,” displacing as many as 74 million peasant households, or 315 million individuals (Walker 2008:472).


In late 2002 after the local government seized a portion of the villagers’ land and they learned that the officials had leased it for 50 times what they had been paid, nearly 800 of them blocked the construction of a development zone on the land. They organized 16 teams that alternated the sit-ins. But the following spring the police and more than 300 construction workers moved in to break up the occupation. After that the villagers drew up a petition and took it to Beijing, but subsequently learned that officials in Beijing had simply sent their complaints back to the officials who had seized the land. In the spring of 2004 when the local government seized another strip of land, the villagers decided to protest by leaving their remaining fields untilled and survive by eating from the village grain reserves. The refusal to plant was provocative, since officials are held responsible for local production. Villagers also began a new wave of sit-ins to block construction on the strip of land, and once again the police came in and started to arrest people. By that point the villagers were so frustrated, angry and desperate that hundreds of them seized the communist party's village headquarters and held the walled compound for five months. But their effort produced no positive result and in the end the government sent 2,000 paramilitary troops to forcibly remove the protestors and arrest the leaders. The assault broke the protests. As one woman said: 'Nobody will dare protest now. Everybody is afraid.'

According to Walker (2008:475), this “spiral of violence and resistance” escalated since that time, as local governments increasingly made use of criminal networks to do their dirty work, and the state “armed paramilitary troops with real rather than rubber bullets,” leading to more violent repression:

In Shengyou village in Hebei Province in 2005, with the approval of local authorities, a construction contractor sent in 300 helmeted thugs armed with hunting rifles, metal pipes and shovels to remove villagers who were occupying land that had been seized by the local government. In the confrontation that followed, the thugs shot and killed six villagers and wounded over 100… [And in] Shanwei in the southern province of Guangdong, paramilitary troops, who were sent in late 2006 to uproot and disperse participants in another land occupation and struggle, killed as many as 20 villagers in what became known as the ‘Shanwei Massacre.’

In response to this “escalating spiral of violence and resistance,” coupled with “concern that the loss of farmland from land seizures could affect the country's food security, in 2003 the central government began to make land seizures a centrepiece of its policy” (Walker 2008:475). It started by limiting the number of development zones and cracking down on illegal land grabs, and in 2004 “it suspended all non-urgent
conversion of agricultural land for six months, and then issued new regulations requiring any such change to be approved at a high level.” However, “as in its campaigns against corruption and tax abuse,” these reforms “had only minimal effect. According to figures released by the Ministry of Land and Resources, there were, for example, 168,000 cases of illegal land deals in 2004,” and in a 2006 speech Premier Wen Jiabao “bluntly admitted that illegal seizures without adequate compensation were still a key source both of instability and of uprisings in the countryside.” In 2007, “the National People’s Congress passed a law limiting the conditions for the transfer of rights of contracted rural land and prohibiting transfers of land with existing homes,” but, Walker concludes, “it appears that these regulations will do little to deter ‘wicked coalitions’ of officials and developers in illegal expropriations, or their use of thug violence to carry them out.”

Coupled with that 2007 regulation was the “red line” of 120 million hectares under which China’s arable land would not be allowed to drop, out of concern for food security, announced by Wen Jiabao at the CCP’s 17th National Congress.33 The previous year, however, the progressive restrictions on rural taxes and fees, begun in response to peasant unrest in the late 1990s, had culminated in their complete abolition. Beijing attempted to compensate for this loss of revenue to local governments by increasing its budget allocation and merging offices to cut down on personnel, but local officials continued to search for other sources of revenue. This pressure has only increased as the massive local government loans taken out especially since 2008 (pushed by Beijing’s stimulus package after 23 million workers from rural areas lost their jobs in the financial crisis) have begun to mature, with debt amounting to 1.7 trillion US dollars in 2010.34 Somewhat ironically, many local governments found a solution in Beijing’s own NSC (New Socialist Countryside) campaign, also launched at this time with the intention of “lightening the peasants’ burden” (and increasing their incorporation into capitalism by promoting rural consumption). Despite the broad variety of projects included in NSC’s official guidelines, local governments naturally focused on aspects that could generate revenue (both legally and illegally, as always), and the most lucrative aspect has been the continuation of land grabs and real estate development – now framed as providing improved housing for peasants, but often including additional housing for sale to rich urbanites, along with tourist resorts, factories, and capitalist farms or “co-ops” (portrayed, of course, as ways to generate income for the villagers). Although Beijing continued to restrict land transfers and attempt to deflate the real estate bubble, land sales and taxes on property transactions accounted for between 30 and 74 percent of local government revenue for most of the past decade (up from 10% in the late 1990s), increasing 45% in 2013, and they are expected to increase further in

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the coming years as more government loans mature (except for those localities able to benefit from the inland flight of industrial production and the development of capitalist agriculture and resource extraction).35

Beijing’s “red line” would seem to preclude such projects, but local officials have cleverly teamed up with real estate developers to overcome this obstacle by inventing a new commodity: “land development rights.” Developers may convert farmland to “construction land” if they pay for the creation of an equivalent amount of farmland elsewhere. This is often done by moving peasants from their old houses into new high-rises occupying less area per person, and then converting the old residential lots into farmland. Each unit of farmland thus created gives the local government (technically the villagers) a right that can then be sold to developers, much like carbon trading.36

Workarounds such as this have enabled the “land grab epidemic” not only to continue but even to grow since 2006, along with peasant resistance (as Walker predicted). According to a series of surveys conducted between 1999 and 2011, on 1,791 rural households from 17 provinces, “There has been a steady increase since 2005 in the number of ‘land takings’ or compulsory state acquisitions,” affecting 43% of the villages surveyed and an estimated 4 million peasants per year throughout China.37 “The mean compensation that the local government paid to the farmers was approximately $17,850 per acre,” while the mean price at which the governments resold the land to developers was $740,000 per acre – over 40 times what the villagers received. “When farmers are relocated or ‘urbanized,’ only a bit more than twenty percent gained an urban hukou or registration; 13.9 percent received urban social security coverage; 9.4 percent received medical insurance; and only 21.4 percent had access to schools for their children” (Economy 2012). Local authorities have become more savvy in their efforts to minimize resistance, for example, by spacing out land grabs over time, giving villagers shares in enterprises (such as capitalist farms and factories for processing agricultural products) that occupy their land, and using the new market in land development rights to finance the construction of high-rises for villagers (which peasants often prefer because they are more “modern,” although they usually require peasants to switch from subsistence farming to buying most of what they consume). Nevertheless, peasant resistance to land grabs seems to have also increased throughout this period,


37 These five surveys were conducted jointly by the Landesa Institute, Renmin University of China, and Michigan State University. The results are here: http://www.landesa.org/news/6th-china-survey/. My quotations are from Elizabeth Economy’s 2012 summary, “A Land Grab Epidemic: China’s Wonderful World of Wukans” (http://blogs.cfr.org/asia/2012/02/07/a-land-grab-epidemic-chinas-wonderful-world-of-wukans/).
with 65% of 2010’s estimated 180,000 “mass incidents” involving conflicts over land, according to one widely-cited study,\(^3\) until they were allegedly surpassed by environmental protests in 2013.\(^4\)

\(\text{A Spiral of What?}\)

I disagree, however, with Walker’s portrayal of land conflicts since the mid-2000s as “an escalating spiral of violence and resistance” that “have had a more profound impact than tax and fee abuses” in that “the seizures destroy peasants’ livelihoods and basis for survival” (Walker 2008:474). Of the dozens of recent peasant land conflicts that I have read or heard about or witnessed, only three opposed the land grab as such, seeking to keep the land, and none of those aimed to use the land for farming; all the others merely pressured the authorities to increase monetary compensation. In some cases this might be explained as an index of peasants’ desperation in the face of state force (often supplemented by thug violence): they may have preferred to keep their land, but felt that such a demand would have been hopeless, or much less likely to succeed than a demand for increased compensation. Several cases suggest the opposite, however.

In the most extreme example I have witnessed, in 2011, peasants in Anhui petitioned the local government because their village authorities did NOT appropriate their land: they felt cheated because those villagers who lost their land received new housing and monetary compensation. It is significant that this was not in the outskirts of a large city, where most “peasants” have already abandoned farming and the land has a higher value for real estate development than for agriculture. This was in a relatively poor village where most households still supplemented their incomes from (migrant or local) jobs with farming for subsistence and sale, and the development project was not related to urban expansion or investment, but was merely an effort by the village authorities to benefit from NSC by selling land development rights. The protesting peasants still valued their farmland as a supplement to their low and unstable incomes, but they would have lost only part of it in the development project, and they placed a higher value on the compensation.

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3\(^{3}\) Economy (2012) and many other reports take this figure (65% of 180,000 mass incidents in 2010) from a study by sociologist Sun Liping. Another report, by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, says that only 22% of 871 incidents between 2000 and 2013 were “protests against land acquisitions and forced demolitions.” (“Report identifies sources of mass protests,” http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-04/09/content_17415767.htm).

3\(^{4}\) One 2013 news report claims that environmental protests have surpassed land conflicts as the “main cause of social unrest” in China, but this is based only on the comment of a retired CCP official, so must be taken with a grain of salt (http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-03-06/pollution-passes-land-grievances-as-main-spark-of-china-protests.html). In any case, both types of unrest have continued and perhaps increased over the past decade, and peasants have played a major role in both. (The most well-known environmental protests have been by urbanites against the construction of chemical plants, and it is not clear to me whether “land conflicts” includes urbanites’ resistance to forced eviction for urban renewal projects – another major source of unrest in recent years.)
A more typical example I witnessed involved two related conflicts in an even poorer and more remote village in a hilly part of Guizhou (China’s poorest province), where almost all the young adults lived outside the village most of the time. (Over 500 came home – mostly from coastal Guangdong – during the financial crisis of 2008, but almost all of those found new jobs within the next year – many in Guizhou’s two largest cities.) The first conflict occurred when the prefectural government built a highway through the village, connecting the prefectural capital with an old military airport that was being converted to civilian use as part of national project to develop Guizhou. The villagers I interviewed all regarded the highway as a blessing, since they thought it would bring development in the form of customers for roadside stores they could open, and possibly even factories in the nearby town – thus allowing villagers to work for wages without having to travel several days to coastal cities, where most of the young adults worked. I was thus surprised when, in the midst of listening to one group of villagers praising the new highway, someone outside started shouting and dozens of villagers ran to a nearby hill to stand in front a power shovel, preventing it from excavating stone for use in constructing the highway. After several days of inquiry and enigmatic explanations, I finally learned that the villagers’ complaint was not against the project in general or even the destruction of their land as such, but against the disturbance of this particular hill, which was believed to possess geomantic significance (fengshui). They were hesitant to tell me this because they knew that the “scientific” CCP officially regards fengshui as superstition, so instead the villagers framed the issue in other ways that could not justify why they wanted to end the excavation, as opposed to merely accepting the compensation offered by the government. This was one of the three recent land conflicts I know of where villagers opposed the land seizure as such (or more precisely, in this case, the extraction of stone). Several months later, when the local township government occupied much more of their land – some of this hilly village’s already small amount of level farmland under cultivation – to lease out for real estate development, the villagers sought only an increase in compensation (successfully, this time).

One of the other two cases where villagers opposed the land grab as such was similar to the fengshui case, in that the object was not farmland but hilly woodland that the villagers valued mainly for sentimental reasons and (to a much smaller degree) wild medicinal herbs. (In this part of Guangdong, anti-deforestation policies prohibit peasants from felling trees for construction or firewood.) The researcher I spoke to said that the main impetus for this mobilization was the sense of injustice cultivated by a few villagers who had attended high school (most Chinese ruralites drop out after middle school) and, after learning that the village authorities had sold the land illegally, educated themselves about the law. These activists then used this knowledge to mobilize other villagers to petition the government, recall the village authorities and elect new ones, and reclaim the stolen land.
Wukan, Wukan!

The only other recent land conflict I know of where villagers opposed the land seizure as such was also China’s most well-known land conflict of the past decade, and possibly this decade’s largest uprising of “farmers” (as most news reports put it): the 2011 Siege of Wukan Village in coastal Guangdong.\(^40\) Again, however, the villagers opposed the seizure not in order to use the land for farming but, in this case (at least according to the plurality of villager representatives in the most recently reported vote), in order to lease it out for development – just as the incumbent village authorities had done, but this time with each villager receiving a dividend of the rent (to which they were legally entitled in any case). Most of the 20,000 villagers did not intend to use the land for farming since they had abandoned it years ago, except for garden plots used by the elderly. Instead they spent most of their time in nearby cities such as Shenzhen working for wages or running small businesses, such as electronics accessory stalls and garment transport services. Indeed, the very fact that a paramilitary siege could threaten Wukan with starvation in a few days should be a clue that this was not a “peasant village” in the sense of even partial self-sufficiency: almost all their food and other necessities were purchased from outside. Wukan’s only significant agricultural activity was commercial aquaculture, done by peasants from inland China who rented offshore fishery plots (yuwei). This conflict, therefore, cannot be understood as a struggle by peasants against the expropriation of their “basis of survival.” Neither, however, was it simply a dispute among landowners about how to divvy up the rent from commercial development. As in many mass mobilizations, the experience of conflict with the state enabled the movement to overflow its initial narrowly-defined goals into more subversive possibilities – until those possibilities were suppressed by the movement’s formal victory – somewhat like the contemporaneous Arab Spring.

Wuhan, Wuhan!

One effort to link an (ex-)peasant land conflict with the consciously anti-capitalist actions of urbanites occurred in the 2010 movement to protect East Lake in Wuhan, Hubei. According to one report,\(^41\) in December 2009 the government of Wuhan secretly “signed a long-term lease with the state-owned real estate development company OCT (Overseas Chinese Town)” for 211 hectares, including 30 hectares of the East Lake Ecological Preserve, “to the tune of 4.3 billion yuan (630 million US dollars) – the most lucrative lease of the year for rapidly-expanding Wuhan”:

\(^{40}\) My account is based on various news reports (such as those listed here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wukan_protests and personnel communication with an activist who visited Wukan for several days and interviewed key participants during the siege of December 2011.

OCT’s plan includes an amusement park (Happy Valley) and upscale shopping areas, hotels and condominiums. **Two villages and a fishery have already been evicted and demolished, starting immediately after the lease was signed last December, and a third village is in the process of eviction.** Villagers and fishery workers claim that part of the compensation promised by OCT has been pocketed by government officials, and when they petitioned the government about this they were assaulted by hired thugs. Most of these petitioners have backed down, but about 50 families in the third village are still holding out. All of this went largely unnoticed by Wuhan’s urban population and the news media for three months.

When *Times Weekly* published [a report revealing this information] on March 25, within two hours of its online publication over a thousand comments had been posted about it, according to the author’s blog. The chief concern among online critics of the plan was the possible ecological consequences, since water pollution and algae outbreaks have been increasing rapidly throughout China in recent years, rendering half of China’s population and two-thirds of China’s rural population unable to access safe drinking water. In addition to concerns about the quality of water for consumption, critics also highlight East Lake’s value as Wuhan’s only body of water safe for swimming now that Tangxun and other lakes have been polluted. Finally, critics are concerned about gentrification, as the development plan would transform the lake and its environs from a peaceful, clean place where anyone can enjoy the natural world for free (or a small entrance fee for some of the parks) to an expensive, noisy and artificial resort for the rich. In this sense some commentators emphasize that the effort to protect East Lake differs from recent comparable protests in China since its goal is not to protect private property or relocate environmental pollution farther away from the city, but to prevent public property from privatization.

Critics of the development plan formed an internet group on QQ (China’s most popular social networking service), which soon reached the maximum 100 members per group allowed by QQ and spilled over into several more groups. The idea emerged of “going for a stroll” (散步), that is, staging a protest march without banners and, when questioned, claiming everyone was “just going for a stroll.” But last Thursday and Friday police visited the homes of people from the QQ groups and convinced them not to join the protest planned for Saturday. [Also, “students were warned against participating by school authorities, and at least one organizer had his internet cut off.”]

Urban participants in this movement (including at least one self-described anarchist of peasant background) said that they approached some of the 50 rural households who were “still holding out,” hoping that they could collaborate, but they discovered that their goals were incompatible: whereas the urbanites
wanted to prevent the development project and keep the lake as it was, the ruralites wanted an increase in compensation. They were not even willing to consider the option of keeping their land and houses. Most had jobs in the city and, even if some used some of their land to supplement their incomes by farming for household use, they apparently valued this less than the money they hoped to obtain from the government in return for giving up their land. Again, it is possible that they would have preferred to keep their land if possible and were doing what seemed most prudent in the face of state force. Also, it would be hasty to generalize from such examples – if anything, such attitudes are more prevalent in the outskirts of major cities, where most ruralites are no longer peasants, and their land is much more valuable for real estate development than for agriculture. Some of these Wuhan activists had also established a social center in another peri-urban village, and when they learned that the village was scheduled to be demolished for urban expansion, they asked villagers about the possibility of resisting and received responses similar to those in East Lake. Although these cases may not be representative of contemporary Chinese peasant land conflicts in general, they are at least representative of most conflicts on the outskirts of major cities and relatively industrialized areas, and they point to the difficulty of linking such localistic and narrowly-defined struggles with broader movements with a potentially anti-capitalist orientation.

E. Riots as Crucible of “Socio-Cultural Unity”?

Walker’s (2008:476-477) portrayal of recent land conflicts as an “escalating spiral” culminates in an argument that such conflicts have played an important role in the emergence of a “shared class perspective” among “the rural poor, the ‘have nothings’, migrant workers, disenfranchised workers and urban poor.” She compares this to earlier periods in Chinese history (in the 17th and early 20th centuries), when “sustained rural collective action – rooted in local struggles – developed on a transregional or even national scale” and “assumed the character of a movement” by forming “a unified discourse of dissent.” This is a little confusing, however, since these earlier movements were based on the shared relations of peasants to their exploiters or expropriators: a 17th century movement against serfdom; an early 20th century movement against rent and taxes; and the 1990s-2000s movement against land grabs. The newly emerging class perspective she identifies, on the other hand, seems – judging by her examples – to be based on a shared proletarian condition (i.e. lack of access to means of subsistence), expressed not through common resistance to specific relations of exploitation or expropriation, but through riots against a more generalized sense of inequality, social exclusion, and state-sanctioned violence. It is unclear what these proletarian riots have to do with peasant land conflicts, except that they “echo” the latter – perhaps because many of the rioters recently became (more fully) proletarianized through these very land grabs: “Peasants who have lost their land through seizures or
who otherwise have been made landless now say they belong to a new ‘class’ of ‘three nothings’– no land, no work, no social security”:

The indignation and anger of many rural residents regarding the growing inequalities of the post-socialist path have been echoed in recent years by the ‘eruption’ of numerous large-scale societal outbursts. Not unsurprisingly, the rural, suburban and urban areas in which these risings occurred often had large rural migrant populations. Most of these ‘spontaneous’ outbursts involved the amassing of tens of thousands of people within a matter of hours. They generated considerable violence, including attacks on police headquarters, police vehicles, state property and the property of the wealthy or officials whom the police protected, and were contained only by the state’s deployment of large numbers of paramilitary forces. Most were triggered by incidents in which officials, the newly wealthy or even minor state employees acted with contempt and brutality toward migrants, peasants and the urban poor… In 2004, for example, in the Wanzhou district of Chongqing… where many rural residents had been resettled due to the Three Gorges Dam project – perhaps as many as 80,000 people ‘rioted’ after a tax official brutally beat a migrant worker who had accidentally bumped into the official’s wife… Similarly in 2005, 50,000 migrant workers in Guangdong also ‘rioted’ after a security guard killed a migrant youth accused of stealing a bicycle.

Although Walker claims these “large-scale societal outbursts” involved “migrants, peasants, and the urban poor” in “rural, suburban, and urban areas,” the only two examples she provides took place in cities and centered on state-sanctioned violence toward “migrants” – not in rural areas or involving peasant issues as such (such as land or agriculture). In this regard, these mid-2000s examples resemble most of the more recent large-scale riots that I have read or heard of, including the most publicized incidents among a series of riots leading up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008:

March:

- The largest ever Tibetan protests and riots throughout China – influenced by nationalism (and portrayed as purely nationalist by both Chinese and Western media), but significantly fueled by a more generalized sense of desperation among former pastoralists recently proletarianized by capitalist development of Tibetan grasslands – development facilitated by the Han-dominated party-state and thus conflated with Han Chinese in general (hence both the widespread resonance of Tibetan nationalism and the indiscriminate attacks on Han shop-owners, for example);42

- Similar riots by Uighurs against Han Chinese in Xinjiang in response to the death in police custody of a famous Uighur philanthropist – comparable to the Tibetan riots in the channeling of generalized proletarian discontent into nationalist violence;43

June:

- In Weng’an, Guizhou (a small city in China’s poorest province), tens of thousands attacked government buildings and torched police vehicles in response to the alleged cover-up of a girl’s mysterious death, and to police violence against protestors;44

November (after the Olympics):

- In Longnan, Gansu, several thousand people attacked government office and fought with police in response to corruption and police brutality;45
- In Shenzhen, hundreds rioted in response to police murder of a migrant motorcycle taxi driver accosted for speeding.46

Still more recently, some of the largest riots to have reached the news media were not only carried out by (ex-peasant) proletarians in (peri-)urban industrial districts, but more specifically, they can only be understood as wage-laborers’ direct resistance to industrial capitalist exploitation in the workplace, as opposed to the riots described above against police brutality or a more generalized sense of injustice. (A typical example of such “collective bargaining by riot” was the 2012 Foxconn workers’ rebellion in Taiyuan.47) As analyzed elsewhere in this volume, one reason some these recent workers’ struggles took the form of riots instead of strikes was the immense scale in which certain forms of industrial production have been reorganized in recent years, alongside the continuation of small-scale “post-Fordist” workshops contracting with transnational retailers. Both extreme scales of contemporary productive organization (huge and tiny) have tended to make traditional strikes less feasible than riots even for many of those ex-peasants “fortunate” enough to find formal employment.

44 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008_Weng%27an_riot
Conclusion

While it seems clear that both *rural (ex-)peasant resistance to expropriation* and *urban (ex-)peasant proletarian resistance to exploitation and exclusion* have continued to grow in frequency over the past decade, I am aware of no cases in which these two types of struggle have linked up or even resonated significantly with one another. This is somewhat surprising, considering that many of the proletarians striking or rioting in the city probably fought against expropriation in their rural homes a few years before, or at least have friends or relatives involved in such rural struggles. My tentative explanation of this disconnect is the participants’ qualitatively different relation to capital embodied in these two different types of struggle. However, if China’s economic growth finally crashes or slows significantly (as economists have been predicting for nearly a decade), and many ex-peasants try to return to their rural birthplaces, it may be possible for these two types of struggle to link up in the future, perhaps even granting a more expansive and anti-capitalist orientation to the rural struggles that so far have tended to be localistic and narrowly-defined.