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Land Takings and Political Trust in Rural China

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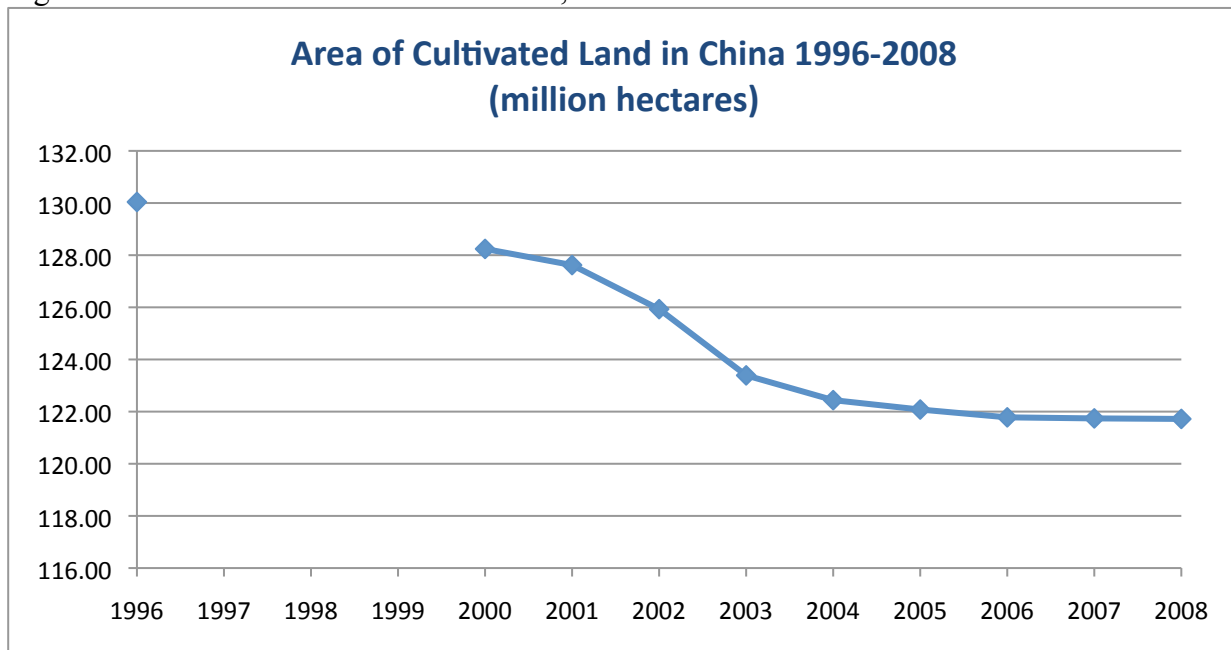
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A key dimension of China's extraordinary development experience is the massive loss of agricultural land to commercial and industrial development.¹ In spite of efforts at reclamation, total cultivated land area has suffered a significant decline since the 1990s (Figure 1). The Chinese state, through its municipal governments, plays a central role in reengineering the patterns of land use and development in China, and with trillions of dollars at stake, has eagerly helped itself to the wealth generated in the process.

Figure 1. Area of Cultivated Land in China, 1996-2008



Source: Notice of the State Council on Issuing the Outline of the National Overall Planning on Land Use²; China Environment Statistics Yearbook 2010³

¹ Lin 2009.

² General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 'Guowuyuan Bangongting Guanyu Yinfu Quanguo Tudi Liyong Zongti Guihua Gangyao de Tongzhi [Notice of the State Council on Issuing the Outline of the National Overall Planning on Land Use]', accessed April 2, 1999, http://www.gov.cn/xxgk/pub/govpublic/mrlm/201011/t20101115_62801.html

³ National Bureau of Statistics of China and Ministry of Environmental Protection of the People's Republic of China, *2010 Zhongguo Huanjing Tongji Nianjian [China Statistical Yearbook on Environment 2011]* (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2011)

Even in the best of circumstances, massive changes in wealth may create serious social and political strains. Because of the legacy of the Communist revolution and the nature of Chinese politics and law, under which private ownership of land remains off limits, the requisitioning of land and the demolition of property for new development have been especially contentious in China. The widely publicized Wukan (Guangdong) riots, in which soon-to-be-dispossessed villagers chased off local leaders and wrung concessions from provincial officials, were unique only in their intensity and press coverage. A recent survey found that 43.1% of villages have experienced land requisitions since the late 1990s, affecting approximately 4 million rural Chinese per year.⁴ Affected villagers frequently balk at the meager compensation offered to them by local authorities and have resorted to a wide repertoire of actions to protect their own interests. In consequence, land seizures and forced evictions have become the leading cause of “instability” in the countryside.⁵ Of the 187,000 “mass incidents” that occurred in China in 2010, more than 65% were due to farmers’ anger at losing their land on what they perceived to be unfair terms.⁶ The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences reports that 73% of the petitions filed by rural residents are related to land.⁷

As a regime that capitalized on peasant grievances on its road to power, the Communist Party leadership has been keenly aware of the importance of the countryside.⁸ Partly to address serious grievances in the countryside,⁹ China’s central leaders have made attempts since the mid-2000s to reduce the tax and fee burdens on farmers, improve rural education, and provide health

⁴ “Findings from Landesa’s Survey” 2012.

⁵ E.g., Yan 2011; Yu 2006.

⁶ “Findings from Landesa’s Survey” 2012.

⁷ “Land Battles Most Dire Rural Issue” 2010.

⁸ Bianco 1971.

⁹ Chen and Wu 2006.

insurance for the rural population. Given that land requisition is unlikely to recede as a political issue anytime soon—breakneck urbanization will continue to require large-scale farmland conversion for the foreseeable future—it is worth considering what implications land requisition has for state-society relations in China. Clearly, land-related “mass incidents” present a serious challenge for local leaders, tasked as they are with ensuring social stability. The Wukan case dramatically demonstrates what can happen when local officials ignore villager interests in the requisition process; the two top leaders in the village lost their jobs after fleeing heated protests.¹⁰ But what about national leaders? Do dispossessed villagers blame the central government for their misfortune? Is it possible that land seizures will undermine the legitimacy of Communist Party rule in the eyes of rural residents?

In this article, we shed light on the broader consequences of land requisition by analyzing the effect of land takings on political trust—both in local and national leaders. As we note below, political trust may play a key role not only in easing policy implementation, but also in maintaining regime legitimacy. A finding that land requisition reduces trust in central authorities would potentially have serious repercussions for the future of state-society relations, and even one-party rule. That is not what we find, however. Our analysis of two distinct surveys shows that land requisitioning is associated with a decline in villagers’ trust in local authorities only; trust in the central government appears unaffected.

We discuss the implications of these findings in our conclusion. Because they tend to escape blame for villagers’ land losses, central authorities appear to have “room to maneuver” when it comes to addressing rural issues.¹¹ Nevertheless, the prospect of declining trust in local

¹⁰ Ewing 2012.

¹¹ Li 2004, 230.

officials remains cause for concern for China's ruling elite. A widening gap between villagers' trust in central and local authorities will likely complicate local policy implementation; it may also kindle further unrest. Finally, we note that trust in local cadres is not the only political casualty of widespread land requisition. The so-called "enclosure movement" (*quandi yundong*) is remaking China's social terrain in ways that may not be favorable to the continued stability of one-party rule.

Land Requisition and China's Hyper-Growth

China's top leaders recognize the problem posed by land. Speaking on a tour to Guangdong, where Wukan is located, Premier Wen Jiabao remarked: "What is the widespread problem right now? It's the arbitrary seizure of peasants' land, and the peasants have complaints, so much so that it's triggering mass incidents."¹² The central government has also taken concrete steps to limit requisition and to promote fair compensation for villagers.¹³ Nevertheless, land-related instability continues unabated.¹⁴ Understanding the difficulties faced by would-be reformers requires understanding the fiscal incentives faced by local officials. First, throughout most of the reform period, rapid industrialization and urbanization have increased the value of land, particularly rural land on the urban periphery; consequently, leasing farmland to local enterprises or urban developers has become an attractive source of revenue to local officials. Second, several waves of tax and fiscal reforms—often aimed at improving rural living standards—have chipped away at local government revenues even as local authorities face a growing list of central government mandates. Ambitious but cash-strapped local officials

¹² Spegele 2012.

¹³ Ho and Lin 2003.

sometimes have little choice but to turn to land requisition to finance their operations. In doing so, local authorities have a clear incentive to under-compensate villagers. Some local officials seem themselves being with their unbearable burdens and liken themselves to “virtuous women being forced to turn to prostitution.”¹⁵

Chinese villagers do not individually own the land they farm; instead, the majority of agricultural land in China belongs to village collectives. In practice, collective ownership makes it much easier for village leaders to decide whether to transfer land use rights to commercial or residential developers.¹⁶ These cadres also have considerable discretion in apportioning the profits from such transfers.¹⁷ Legally, however, village collectives cannot convert agricultural land to non-agricultural uses without the approval of higher-level governments. Moreover, the Land Management Law empowers local governments at the township level and above to requisition collective land on the ill-defined basis of “public interests.”¹⁸ It is local government officials, therefore, who have near-monopoly power over the conversion of agricultural land to industrial and commercial use.¹⁹

Industrialization and urbanization have enabled local authorities to use this power to their fiscal benefit throughout the post-Mao period. During the “golden age of township and village enterprises,” which lasted until the mid 1990s, local cadres faced strong incentives to transform moribund state-owned and collective enterprises into dynamic businesses. The resulting rural

¹⁴ Jacobs 2011; “Findings from Landesa’s Survey” 2012.

¹⁵ Wang Nanjian, Director General of the Local Taxation Bureau of Guangdong Province, quoted in Liu 2012.

¹⁶ Cai 2003.

¹⁷ Guo 2001.

¹⁸ Ding 2007; Hsing 2010; Washburn 2011; World Bank 2005.

¹⁹ We do recognize that some villages have skirted the law and built commercial real estate that is referred to as 小产权房.

industrialization boom helped ignite China's economic take-off during the early reform period.²⁰ Naturally, booming businesses and expanding cities required space to grow, increasing the demand for rural land.²¹ This demand has not slackened since the demise of most TVEs in the mid-to-late 1990s; the number of private firms in rural China continues to grow.²² If anything, the fervor of local officials for industrialization has increased in recent years, as the number of "industrialization parks" and "development zones"—most of which require considerable land requisition—grew from 3,837 in 2003 to 6,015 in 2006.²³

Urbanization has played a similar role in increasing the demand for villagers' land. Three decades ago, at the beginning of market reform, only one in five Chinese lived in cities; today 51% do, up from 36% in 2000.²⁴ Ballooning cities require a staggering amount of land. To note just one striking example, the built-up area of Yantai, in Shandong Province, grew more by nearly 200% (from 120 square kilometers to 340) during a single three-year period (2001-2004).²⁵ Most new urban developments require government land requisition, and the most common source for such requisitions is cultivated farmland.²⁶ Urban municipal governments are not the only officials who look at peripheral villages and see lucrative housing developments; township leaders have also become savvy developers of suburban real estate. On the periphery of urban areas such as Beijing and Shenzhen, township leaders have begun constructing apartment

²⁰ Naughton 2007.

²¹ Ho and Lin 2003.

²² Naughton 2007.

²³ Zhai and Xiang 2007.

²⁴ Simpson 2012.

²⁵ Ding 2007.

²⁶ Ibid.

buildings for urban dwellers on village land—with or without the required higher-level approval.²⁷

However, land expropriation is not just an *opportunity* for unscrupulous local officials; fiscal and tax reform initiatives have dried up local government revenues, arguably making land expropriation a *necessity* in many places. Fiscal pressures on local governments have been enormous since the 1994 fiscal reform, which centralized tax revenues without centralizing social service expenditures.²⁸ Where local enterprises did not make up revenue shortfalls, social service obligations became, in effect, “unfunded mandates.” Local governments attempting to fulfill their obligations often had no choice but to collect regressive taxes and fees. These so-called “peasant burdens” were the leading cause of rural unrest through most of the 1990s.²⁹

It was with the goal of alleviating “peasant burdens” that the central government enacted “tax-and-fee reform” in the early 2000s. Tax-and-fee reform prohibited the collection of non-tax fees, which, compared to taxes, were considered “extremely chaotic, non-transparent and often inequitable.”³⁰ In 2006, the central government took its offensive against “peasant burdens” even further by eliminating the 2,000-year-old agricultural tax. Central government policymakers proposed that higher-level transfer payments would make up revenue shortfalls, but subsequent research has revealed these transfer payments to be woefully insufficient.³¹ County and township governments struggle to fill their coffers as never before—making land expropriation not only attractive as a revenue source, but sometimes, perhaps, inevitable. Land-leasing income has consequently become the single most important source of local government revenue. In 2005, the

²⁷ Hsing 2010.

²⁸ World Bank 2002.

²⁹ Bernstein and Lü 2000.

³⁰ Yep 2004; Wong 1997, 203.

World Bank estimated that land-transfer fees accounted for somewhere between 30-50% of sub-provincial government revenue.³² In 2009, according to a group of Chinese scholars, local governments raised more than 1.42 trillion *yuan* (US\$223.8 billion), or 46% of their total revenue, through land sales.³³

The pressures inclining local authorities to requisition land are the same ones that prompt them to under-compensate farmers. The legal framework for land requisition makes under-compensation easy: Article 47 of the Land Administration Law states that farmer compensation should be based on the agricultural output of the land in question—*not* the land’s ultimate sale price. “The formula means that farmers are effectively unable to receive anywhere close to the market value of their land.”³⁴ Thus, in a 2011 survey of 1,791 villages, dispossessed respondents reported receiving an average of 18,739 *yuan* per *mu* of their land (approximately \$17,850 per acre). This figure represented a mere 2.4% of the 778,000 *yuan* per *mu* (\$740,000 per acre) received, on average, by local authorities. Moreover, the frequency of land takings appears to be increasing as the pace of urbanization in China has picked up.³⁵ Land issues have replaced “peasant burdens” as the number-one cause of rural protests, demonstrating that land requisition and political trust appear inextricably linked.³⁶ It is to the issue of political trust that we turn.

³¹ Luo et al. 2007; Nitikin et al. 2012; O’Brien and Han 2009.

³² World Bank 2005.

³³ Amnesty International 2012.

³⁴ Ibid., 46; see also Washburn 2011.

³⁵ “Findings from Landesa’s Survey” 2012.

³⁶ Bernstein 2006.

The Importance of Political Trust

A finding that requisition hurts trust—either in local or central authorities—can not only shed insight into the dynamics of state-society relations, but also have serious implications for understanding the prospects for Chinese reform. First, low levels of trust are likely to hinder effective policy implementation. Second, eroding trust may increase the likelihood of aggressive forms of political participation, especially protests. Third, declining trust in the central government could potentially be read to imply declining legitimacy of one-party rule.

Considerable evidence demonstrates that political trust eases policy implementation; low trust, on the other hand, “helps create a political environment in which it is more difficult for leaders to succeed.”³⁷ In the American context, Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn find that declining trust in Congress lowers public support for a wide variety of government actions.³⁸ Eroding trust in local leaders appears to decrease satisfaction with public service provision.³⁹ Trust may play a crucial role in promoting citizen compliance as well. Trusting citizens not only display a greater willingness to consent to government rules and regulations; they are also more likely to pay their taxes.⁴⁰

Granted, most studies observing a link between political trust and policy implementation have been carried out in democracies. Even as China has reformed, its leadership has been more preoccupied with governance and social stability than with broadening political participation.⁴¹ Nonetheless, as China has moved away from the era of strong-man rule and as interests in China have become increasingly diverse, local authorities seeking to get policies implemented and

³⁷ Hetherington 1998, 791.

³⁸ Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn 2000.

³⁹ Beck, Rainey and Traut 1990.

⁴⁰ Tyler 1990; Levi 1988, 1997; Scholz and Lubell 1998.

projects completed are likely to benefit from a wellspring of citizen trust—and to struggle when such trust proves to be in short supply.⁴²

A wide variety of sources have provided evidence for Gamson's claim that declining political trust and rising political efficacy create the ideal conditions for participation in demonstrations, riots and other forms of non-traditional political behavior.⁴³ Muller et al. and Citrin, however, find that only alienation from the existing regime inclines citizens toward mobilization, while Muller observes that declining trust increases the likelihood of protest activity only for those who believe that aggressive tactics have been effective in the past.⁴⁴ Higher levels of political trust would thus make it less likely for Chinese citizens to mobilize and protest. In contrast, numerous cases of mass incidents have occurred due to policies that failed to win public trust, as municipal leaders from Dalian to Ningbo to Xiamen have found out to their astonishment when they were forced to terminate PX projects in the face of massive public protests.

Finally, there is reason to posit a relationship between political trust and regime legitimacy, but so far the empirical findings from multiple countries are mixed. Several studies of non-democratic countries, including Ukraine, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, point to a connection between declining trust in authoritarian leaders and increasing support for democratization—i.e., regime change.⁴⁵ Studies by Lianjiang Li also seem to suggest that less-trusting rural residents are more likely to support direct elections for central government

⁴¹ Yang 2004.

⁴² Zhao 2011.

⁴³ Abravanel and Busch 1975; Gamson 1968; Muller, Jukam and Seligson 1982; Paige 1971; Seligson 1980.

⁴⁴ Citrin 1974; Muller 1977; Muller, Jukam and Seligson 1982.

⁴⁵ Jamal 2007; Johnson 2005. Cf. Rose 2007.

leaders.⁴⁶ Yet one can also refer to contrary findings for the imperfectly democratic countries of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, where Rose observes that declining trust does not appear to increase calls for deeper democratization.⁴⁷ In democracies such as the U.S., little connection exists between support for particular leaders and support for the American system of government; low trust in the former does not entail diminished trust in the latter.⁴⁸ In the next section, we hypothesize the nature of the relationship between land requisition and trust in rural China.

Land Requisition and Political Trust: Two Hypotheses

Given the rise of land-related mass incidents, it may come as a surprise that political trust appears to be improving in rural China—albeit modestly. Relying on surveys of rural residents conducted in 2002 and 2010, Ethan Michelson finds that villagers today express more trust in their local leaders than they did at the beginning of the decade. They also report more satisfaction with their own personal lives. This thawing of cadre-villager relations appears linked to increasing public goods provision, as well as to the abolition of the centuries-old agricultural tax.⁴⁹

Whether these improvements will hold is debatable. Major rural public goods programs include initiatives in education, health insurance, and welfare, as well as subsidies for grain farming, seeds, fertilizers, and farm machinery. Coupled with the elimination of the agricultural tax, these initiatives weave a broad tapestry of support, even though each may be limited and

⁴⁶ Li 2004, 2010.

⁴⁷ Rose 2007.

⁴⁸ E.g., Citrin and Green 1986; Lipset and Schneider 1983; Miller and Listhaug 1990.

⁴⁹ Michelson 2012.

some,, such as the subsidies, will be eroded by inflation. Yet the boost in public support such programs engender may dissipate over time as expectations increase and there is some indication that the Chinese public is no exception.⁵⁰ At the same time, some of the public goods programs cited by Michelson were part of the central government's stimulus response to the 2008 global financial crisis. The central government provided only 1.2 trillion *yuan* (US\$188.6 billion) of the 4 trillion *yuan* (US\$628.5 billion) stimulus package, leaving local governments to make up the rest. Many localities have sunk further into debt attempting to fulfill their obligations, and may be constrained from investing more substantially in additional public goods programs.⁵¹

Just as importantly, the massive stimulus led to more development projects and thus greater efforts to requisition land to support such development. Thus the land takings occurred in the context of growing government outlays designed to garner support from rural residents. It would thus be especially interesting we find land takings nonetheless still had a negative effect on political trust in political leaders. Should such a relationship exist, we'll also want to find out how the decline in villagers' trust is distributed. Does it primarily affect those leaders at the local level whom the villagers' recognize, and who were most likely responsible for requisition efforts? Or those at the national level who helped create the political and economic environment in which land requisition occurs?

Answering these questions requires understanding how Chinese tend to "disaggregate" the state.⁵² In China as elsewhere, the state is not experienced as a single behemoth but in its various manifestations, some with a gentle face, others much less benign. With its elaborate hierarchy including the central Party-state (State Council on the government side), province,

⁵⁰ Chen and Yang 2012.

⁵¹ Amnesty International 2011, 13; Shih 2010.

prefecture, county, and town/township, villagers also perceive the multiple layers of government differently. Existing studies reveal that most Chinese citizens, including rural residents, tend to place more trust in the central government than in the local authorities with whom they customarily interact. Insofar as villagers observe local cadre predation, they rarely blame central authorities; they think that higher levels must be unaware of their subordinates' disloyalty, or at least unable to do anything about it.⁵³

Thus, in general, and in contrast with American and Japanese citizens, rural Chinese appear to view central leaders as more trustworthy than the local elites who act as the Center's agents.⁵⁴ The Wukan case demonstrates that this pattern may persist in the wake of land requisition. Over an 18-year period starting in 1993, the Guangdong village (population: 13,000) lost more than 60% of its cultivatable land to repeated waves of land sales engineered by local leaders.⁵⁵ The community's simmering frustration boiled over in December of 2011 when officials acknowledged that Xue Jinbo, a butcher chosen to negotiate on the villagers' behalf, had died in police custody—supposedly of “cardiac failure.” Village leaders had to flee the subsequent tumult. However, even while blockading their leaders' return, Wukan villagers insisted that foreign journalists refrain from calling their actions an “uprising.” A piece of paper in the village's makeshift press center read: “We are not a revolt. We support the Communist

⁵² Perry 1994; Li 2004.

⁵³ O'Brien 2002.

⁵⁴ Pharr (1997) and Jennings (1998) observe the opposite trend in Japan and the United States, respectively; that is, citizens' trust in the central government appears to be declining more rapidly than that in local government. The logic at work, however, may be similar. Both authors posit that citizens find it easier to evaluate the actions of their local leaders. Local government actions perceived as beneficial are likely to increase constituent trust. In rural China, it is possible that the visibility of predatory (or at least non-beneficial) local cadre actions is responsible for low levels of trust.

⁵⁵ Wines 2011.

Party. We love our country.” Their complaint, they maintained, was with their local leaders—*not* the central government.⁵⁶

Granted, in a country where outright criticism of Communist Party authority is anathema, protest leaders have strong reasons to make such tactical declarations in order to protect themselves from the wrath of the Party-state. But declarations of this nature also allow the protestors to speak the language of “rightful resistance” and seek the support of upper-level officials.⁵⁷ (If so, they succeeded; the offending village leaders were forced out of office after provincial leaders intervened.) Given the survey results cited above, however, it seems reasonable to take these claims of central government fealty at face value. We predict that dispossessed villagers elsewhere tend to maintain their trust in the central government, while losing faith in their local leaders. Two hypotheses follow:

Hypothesis 1: All else being equal, rural residents who have experienced land requisition should report lower levels of trust in local officials.

Hypothesis 2: Land requisition should have no significant effect on rural residents’ trust in the central government.

Data and Methodology

Data Source

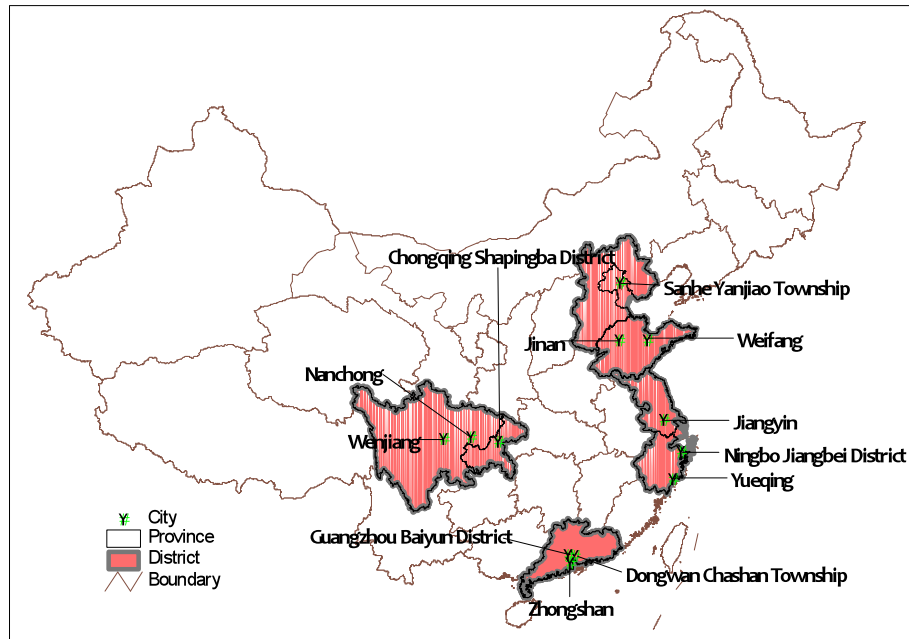
To test these hypotheses, we analyze data from two surveys conducted in 2008 and 2009. The first survey sample includes 1,195 villagers living in the suburban peripheries of 12 Chinese

⁵⁶ Wong 2011.

⁵⁷ O’Brien and Li 2006.

cities (Figure 2). As we explain in more detail below, we attempt to ensure the robustness of our findings by testing the same hypotheses with data from a representative survey of 2,210 villagers carried out in 2008.

Figure 2: Study Sites for 12-City Suburban Surveys



The core of our analysis is the 2009 12-city suburban survey. The sample respondents were selected via stratified sampling within China’s four major urbanizing areas: the Yangtze River Delta (Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang); the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province; the Chengdu-Chongqing region (Sichuan and Chongqing); and the Bohai Bay area (Hebei, Shandong, and Tianjin). In each area one “megapolis,” one “large city,” and one “small- or medium-sized city” were randomly selected, except for Chengdu-Chongqing, where two

megalopolises were chosen.⁵⁸ For each megalopolis, a single suburban district was selected for the survey. The five megalopolis districts include Jiangbei district in Ningbo, Zhejiang; Licheng district in Jinan, Shandong; Baiyun district in Guangzhou, Guangdong; Wenjiang district in Chengdu, Sichuan; and Shapingba district in Chongqing. The remaining cities are Yueqing, Zhejiang; Jiangyin, Jiangsu; Yanjiao, Hebei; Weifang, Shandong; Zhongshan and Dongguan (Chashan town) in Guangdong; and Nanchong, Sichuan. Figure 2 shows the location of each of our selected cities or city districts.

Within each city or district, 5 villages or communities were randomly selected, for a total of 60 villages. In each village or community, we attempted to interview 20 randomly selected households. The research team conducted face-to-face interviews with at least one adult member in each household. Our data include a total of 1,195 observations.

Dependent Variable: Measuring Political Trust

We view political trust as citizens' belief that officials are committed to ruling or governing in their interests.⁵⁹ In view of China's political environment and of the sensitivity to questions related to political trust, the survey questionnaire did not ask respondents to directly respond to and thus confront with the issue of "trust (信任)" of the political authorities. Instead, survey respondents answered questions on whether the local leadership or the central authorities represent and protect the lawful rights and interests of farmers. *1. Do local (county/township) Party/government leaders truly represent and protect the lawful rights and interests of farmers?* *2. Do the Party Central Committee and the State Council truly represent and protect the lawful*

⁵⁸ Following China's city-classification system, these are, respectively, cities with populations over 1 million, between 500,000 and 1 million, and fewer than 500,000.

⁵⁹ Easton 1975; Levi and Stoker 2000.

rights and interests of farmers? We coded responses on a five-level scale: strongly agree (2), slightly agree (1), neutral (0), slightly disagree (-1), and strongly disagree (-2).

Table 1: Measurements of Political Trust in 12-City Suburban Survey

Province	City	Local trust	Central trust	Distance
Chongqing	Chongqing	0.28	1.48	1.19
Guangdong	Dongguan	0.42	1.07	0.64
Guangdong	Guangzhou	0.42	1.10	0.67
Guangdong	Zhongshan	0.55	1.28	0.72
Hebei	Langfang	0.32	1.31	0.98
Jiangsu	Wuxi	0.70	1.34	0.63
Shandong	Jinan	0.45	1.53	1.08
Shandong	Weifang	1.15	1.70	0.55
Sichuan	Chengdu	1.01	1.78	0.77
Sichuan	Nanchong	0.81	1.61	0.80
Zhejiang	Ningbo	-0.09	1.29	1.38
Zhejiang	Wenzhou	-0.73	1.00	1.73
Average		0.44	1.37	0.93

Data source: authors' 2009 survey. Trust in this table is calculated as the average level within city.

Table 1 presents, the average level of local- and central-government trust for each city, as well as the difference between the two. For example, in the sample's most distrustful city, Wenzhou, the average (mean) response to the trust-in-local-government question is -0.73, or somewhere between "neutral" and "slightly disagree." Wenzhou residents do not tend to agree that local leaders are committed to ruling in their interests. Their average level of trust in the central government (1.00) is considerably higher—if lower than in other cities.

In every sample city, residents tend to report higher levels of trust in the central government than in local officials. This finding is consistent with other surveys conducted in China.⁶⁰ Inter-city variation, though, is considerable. On average, villagers in Zhejiang, one of China's most prosperous coastal provinces, report negative trust in their local officials. Those

living in the three Guangdong municipalities also report low levels of trust, but the difference between central and local trust is less significant. Chengdu, in Sichuan, and Weifang, in Shandong, rank particularly high in terms of both central and local political trust.

Independent Variable: Land Requisition

Every village in our sample had experienced some land requisition during the years 2000-2008, but not every household lost land. We hypothesize that this inter-household variation in land takings explains some of the variation in trust in local authorities. Table 2 displays the percentage of dispossessed villagers in each sample city. Overall, 63% of survey respondents report having lost land to requisition. Land requisition rates range from a low of 24.1% in Zhongshan, Guangdong to a high of 96.3% in the sample unit in Chengdu, Sichuan. Dispossessed villagers lost not only farmland, but also orchards, forest and residential land. Due to the political sensitivity of requisition efforts in some villages, we were unable to interview more than 90 villagers in three cities (Wenzhou, Dongguan, and Zhongshan). Had we been able to carry out all these interviews, the revealed average political trust in these areas might have been even lower and thus our sample may have captured less of the variation in political trust than would have been case had all the interviews been conducted.

⁶⁰ Li 2004; Shi 2001; Michelson 2012.

Table 2: Proportion of Dispossessed Farmers in Each City

Province	City	Total Sample	Dispossessed Farmers	
			Number	Percent
Chongqing	Chongqing	103	56	54.4%
Guangdong	Dongguan	90	32	35.6%
Guangdong	Guangzhou	104	29	27.9%
Guangdong	Zhongshan	83	20	24.1%
Hebei	Langfang	108	53	49.1%
Jiangsu	Wuxi	101	79	78.2%
Shandong	Jinan	102	88	86.3%
Shandong	Weifang	109	59	54.1%
Sichuan	Chengdu	109	105	96.3%
Sichuan	Nanchong	105	92	87.6%
Zhejiang	Ningbo	102	90	88.2%
Zhejiang	Wenzhou	79	58	73.4%
Overall		1195	761	63.7%

Data source: authors' 2009 survey.

Control Variables

In studies of Western democracies, various demographic characteristics have been found to influence levels of political trust. Better-educated, higher-income individuals tend to report greater trust in their leaders.⁶¹ The elderly, on average, appear less trusting than the young.⁶² Survey studies in China, however, do not necessarily reveal similar patterns. For instance, Tianjian Shi's study of political trust in China observes very little effect of demographic factors.⁶³ In a study of rural Chinese, Li "partly corroborates" Shi's findings by observing that age, education, gender and Party membership explain less than 3% of the variance in reported trust levels.⁶⁴ He does find that men tend to report higher trust than women, and that—in a reversal of Western trends—better-educated villagers report lower trust than their less-educated

⁶¹ Agger, Goldstein and Pearl 1961; Lineberry and Sharkansky 1971.

⁶² Agger, Goldstein and Pearl 1961.

⁶³ Shi 2001.

⁶⁴ Li 2004, 235.

neighbors.⁶⁵ We control for age, gender (1=male, 0=female), education (in years), marital status (1=married, 0=unmarried), per capita income (logged), and household per capita land area before requisition (in *mu*).

Personal experiences with government officials and policies have the potential to significantly affect an individual's trust in political leaders and institutions. We control for ties to the regime that might be expected to increase political trust: Communist Party membership, People's Liberation Army experience, and experience as a village leader. We also control for various family connections to either the regime or local government leaders: whether respondents have family members who have: served as cadres at the township or county level; been honored by the government; or participated in various wars including "the War to Resist Japanese Aggression," the Chinese Revolution and the Korean War.

Other experiences are likely to reduce trust in political authorities. Millions of Chinese families suffered persecution during various Mao-era political campaigns. Today's migrant workers must contend with institutionalized forms of discrimination and often face harassment from government or quasi-government employees.⁶⁶ To control for these factors, we include variables indicating experiences with political persecution and whether respondents have family who have worked as migrant laborers. Finally, we include village and province dummy variables to remove local fixed effects. Descriptive statistics for our variables are listed in Table 4.

A Complementary Rural Dataset: The Six-Province Rural Survey

The aforementioned survey draws observations from suburban villages to highlight the effect of land takings on political trust; in villages where requisition has occurred, we predict that

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Solinger 1999.

those villagers who have lost land to requisition will tend to be less trusting than their neighbors who have avoided dispossession. To mitigate the problem of generalizability, we run an additional test of our hypotheses by analyzing data from a survey of rural residents conducted in summer 2008 (hereafter the 6-province rural survey). The survey sample, based on stratified sampling, includes 117 sample villages in six provinces (Jilin, Hebei, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Jiangsu, and Fujian). In each village interviews were conducted with a random sample of 20 households. The final sample yielded 2,210 individual respondents.

We use the same variables in analyzing both datasets. Because it is a general rural survey, the percentage of respondents who reported having experienced land requisition is significantly lower, at 12 percent, compared with 63.7 percent in the 12-city suburban survey. Descriptive statistics for the 6-province survey can also be found in Table 4.

Table 3: Proportion of Dispossessed Farmers in 6-Province Rural Survey

Province	Sample Size	# of Dispossessed Farmers	Percent
Fujian	378	56	14.8%
Hebei	372	11	3.0%
Jiangsu	355	29	8.2%
Jilin	373	42	11.3%
Shaanxi	382	73	19.1%
Sichuan	350	56	16.0%
Overall	2210	267	12.1%

Data source: authors' 2008 survey.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

	12-city Suburban Survey					6-province Rural Survey				
	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	Obs.	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min	Max
Land requisition (1=yes)	1195	0.637	0.481	0	1	2210	0.121	0.326	0	1
Gender(1=male)	1195	0.700	0.460	0	1	2210	0.608	0.488	0	1
Age	1195	49.032	11.603	17	86	2210	49.69	11.412	19	87
Education (years)	1195	7.743	3.270	0	19	2210	6.137	3.326	0	16
Marital Status (1=married)	1195	0.941	0.236	0	1	2210	0.935	0.246	0	1
Village Cadre(1=yes)	1195	0.059	0.236	0	1	2210	0.029	0.166	0	1
CCP Member (1=yes)	1195	0.230	0.421	0	1	2210	0.076	0.264	0	1
Veteran (1=yes)	1195	0.094	0.292	0	1	2210	0.045	0.207	0	1
Household income per capita (logged)	1195	9.216	1.259	0	12.4	2210	8.334	0.993	2.6	11.9
Household land area per capita (unit: mu)	1195	0.531	0.882	0	15.6	2210	1.541	1.921	0	33.3
Relatives as local officials (1=yes)	1195	0.125	0.331	0	1	2210	0.162	0.369	0	1
Family member with migration experience (1=yes)	1195	0.433	0.496	0	1	2210	0.612	0.487	0	1
Family members politically persecuted (1=yes)	1195	0.125	0.331	0	1	2210	0.106	0.308	0	1
Family members honored by government (1=yes)	1195	0.294	0.456	0	1	2210	0.208	0.406	0	1
Family member war experience(1=yes)	1195	0.191	0.393	0	1	2210	0.259	0.438	0	1

Data sources: authors' 2008 and 2009 surveys.

Results

Because the dependent variable, political trust, is an ordered, categorical variable, we estimate two ordered logit regression for trust in local and central authorities. Table 5 presents the regression results for both datasets—the 12-city suburban dataset and the 6-province rural dataset.

Table 5: Determinants of Political Trust: Ordered Logit Results

Data sources	12-city Suburban Survey		6-province Rural Survey	
VARIABLES	Local	Central	Local	Central
Land requisition (1=yes; 0=no)	-0.476*** (-3.729)	-0.080 (-0.573)	-0.514*** (-3.856)	0.128 (0.850)
Gender (1=male; 0=female)	-0.210* (-1.714)	0.360*** (2.665)	-0.225*** (-2.646)	0.269*** (2.710)
Age (year)	0.012** (2.063)	0.043*** (6.445)	0.007* (1.876)	0.020*** (4.441)
Education (years)	0.017 (0.848)	0.047** (2.096)	-0.024* (-1.770)	0.031* (1.945)
Marital Status (1=married; 0=unmarried)	0.080 (0.385)	-0.139 (-0.544)	-0.033 (-0.210)	-0.235 (-1.185)
Village Cadre Status (1=yes; 0=no)	0.433* (1.711)	0.804*** (2.869)	0.303 (1.062)	0.636* (1.923)
CCP Member Status (1=yes; 0=no)	0.236* (1.810)	-0.103 (-0.688)	0.268 (1.568)	-0.180 (-0.996)
Veteran Status (1=yes; 0=no)	-0.078 (-0.338)	0.704*** (2.913)	-0.234 (-1.096)	0.029 (0.135)
Household income per capita (Logged)	0.034 (0.792)	0.011 (0.215)	0.039 (0.895)	-0.010 (-0.190)
Household land per capita (before expropriation)	0.143** (2.053)	-0.006 (-0.106)	-0.017 (-0.872)	-0.014 (-0.523)
Relatives as local officials (1=yes; 0=no)	0.017 (0.103)	-0.113 (-0.642)	0.268** (2.388)	0.057 (0.456)
Family member with migration experiences (1=yes; 0=no)	0.077 (0.472)	0.302* (1.653)	0.013 (0.164)	-0.177* (-1.843)
Family members politically persecuted (1=yes; 0=no)	-0.038 (-0.231)	-0.007 (-0.033)	-0.229* (-1.732)	-0.059 (-0.397)
Family members honored by government (1=yes; 0=no)	0.092 (0.755)	-0.049 (-0.365)	0.220** (2.152)	0.273** (2.209)
Family members participated in the wars (1=yes; 0=no)	-0.445*** (-3.113)	-0.013 (-0.087)	-0.031 (-0.335)	0.274** (2.523)
Province Dummy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,195	1,195	2,210	2,210
Pseudo R ²	0.0540	0.0857	0.0220	0.0331

Data source: authors' 2008 and 2009 surveys. Robust z-statistics in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Our results provide strong evidence in support of our main hypotheses. First, data from both surveys show a statistically significant and negative relationship between land requisition and trust in local officials. Villagers who reported having had their land taken through requisition show reduced trust in township and county authorities. Second, in neither dataset do we observe a statistically significant relationship between land requisition and trust in central authorities.

Despite the protests they have caused, land takings and the conflicts they cause are local affairs. They cause dispossessed villagers to lose trust in local officials but not in the central authorities.

Besides the noteworthy findings on land requisition and political trust, we also observe a variety of interesting empirical effects. Among the demographic characteristics, age and gender affect trust in authorities at both local and central levels. For both datasets, we find that males are less trusting of local officials than females. Yet they also exhibit higher levels of trust in the central government than females. This finding corroborates other studies showing that men appear to be more distrustful than women of township and country governments.⁶⁷ It is likely related to the household division of labor in which men play a greater role in interacting with local authorities and thus become more discontented.⁶⁸ Age appears to have the opposite impact on trust than reported in the aforementioned Western studies; older villagers report higher levels of trust in both local and central authorities than their younger counterparts. This may be due to a variety of factors. Younger Chinese tend to be more politically aware and critical because they tend to have access to a wider variety of information and appear to be less affected by government propaganda. Alternatively, older rural residents may be likely to make comparisons with the past, especially the dismal life of the Mao era, and may be more satisfied with recent policies designed to improve their welfare.⁶⁹

Ties to the regime matter. Village leaders in both surveys are found to show greater trust in the central authorities. The suburban survey data also suggest village cadres have a greater sense of trust in local authorities. This lends support to the argument that village leaders are often

⁶⁷ Li 2004.

⁶⁸ Lai 2012.

⁶⁹ See Michelson (2012) for a discussion of recent policies aimed at improving the welfare of elderly rural residents.

allied with external interests, including local government leaders, to profit from the land requisition and subsequent development.⁷⁰ Veterans tend to tilt their support for the central authorities while Party members seemed inclined to trust local authorities. But this inference is valid for the 12-city survey only and is not robust for the 6-province rural survey. Having a family member being honored by the government boost trust in both local and central authorities, according to the 6-province survey. Villagers with war veteran relatives are less likely to trust local officials but are *more* likely to trust the central authorities.

We also observe that increased education in rural China appears positively associated with trust in the central government but does not significantly affect trust in local officials. Marital status, household income per capita, and household land per capita have no significant effect on trust in either of the datasets.

Conclusion and Discussion

No discussion of China's political economy of development and governance can be complete without attention to the issue of land.⁷¹ Building on the legacy of the Communist revolution, numerous land takings under the aegis of government-engineered requisition have facilitated China's rapid industrialization and urbanization. Yet we hypothesized that the major role played by the Chinese state in land takings may have also cost the state much popular support as measured in political trust, especially among those who have had to cede their land holdings without adequate compensation.

⁷⁰ Warner and Yang 2012.

⁷¹ Su, Tao, and Yang forthcoming.

Our empirical analyses, based on two separate but related datasets, confirm our hypotheses strongly with respect to trust in local authorities. Villagers who have been subjected to land requisition are less trusting of local officials than those who have not. Meanwhile, even though the State Council (central government) is the source of regulations on land requisition that allow local authorities to get away with paying low-ball prices to rural communities/villagers, the central government escapes largely unscathed. Villagers who lost land to requisition did not report diminishing trust in central authorities.

Our main findings thus reinforce a conventional but important wisdom about China's hierarchical system of governance. Lower-level authorities are the ones that serve as the fingers (and claws) of the state and carry out policies emanating from the national government, including unpopular policies on birth control and land use. In consequence, they also tend to be blamed when the implementation of these policies goes awry. All too often, local authorities inject their own desire for revenue into the policy implementation process. They collect fines on extra births and offer poor compensation for land requisitioned, only to aggravate popular discontent and incur the wrath of those affected.⁷² As a result, the subjects of land requisitions tend to lose trust in local authorities.

Even when central leaders can be rightfully blamed for not doing enough, as has clearly been the case with the regulations for land requisition, villagers don't tend to lay the blame for their poor treatment at the central leaders. The central leadership has relied on its dominance over the propaganda apparatus to deflect criticism from the central Party-state.⁷³ Newspapers and other forms of media can often criticize local leaders for poor performance and even malfeasance

⁷² Chen and Wu 2006 provide striking examples.

⁷³ Brady 2007, 2011.

but it is taboo to directly criticize national leaders, even retired ones. An army of censors is employed in China to monitor not only newspapers and TV shows but also online chat-rooms and blogs and searches for the names of national leaders such as Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin are routinely sanitized.⁷⁴ As a result, even though land-related disputes and protests have risen sharply over time, villagers who lost land to requisition have not taken the big picture view of land requisition as a national phenomenon and reduced their trust in the central authorities.

On the surface it appears good news for China's central leadership preoccupied with what to them must have been an ominous rise in the number of mass protests. Under the current system, the central authorities do not appear to be in immediate danger of losing the trust of the millions of Chinese who lose their homes and/or farmland to local officials' ceaseless development drive.

Yet the trust gap between local and central authorities sheds important light into the dynamics of and challenges for China's governance. As we noted above, a higher level of political trust makes it easier for officials to do their jobs; the evaporation of this trust complicates policy implementation. More ominously, comparative research shows that distrustful citizens are more likely to engage in aggressive forms of political participation, such as riots and protests, and already many of the "mass incidents" occurring in rural areas are caused by real or perceived unfairness in requisitioning land. Indeed, villagers who trust the central authorities more than the local appear to be more willing to engage in acts of "rightful resistance" against local authorities.⁷⁵ Thus, all things being equal, a higher gap in favor of the

⁷⁴ Hille 2012.

⁷⁵ Li 2004.

central leaders may paradoxically help drive the kind of instability the central government is eager to avoid.

The relationship between land requisition and villagers' declining trust in local authorities also raises broader questions about China's hyper development. So far we have noted that the numerous land takings can be contentious and conflict-ridden but this is only the first order effect of land takings. Taken together and viewed from the national perspective, land takings are also remaking the social landscape. Indeed, Chinese observers have hearkened back to early-modern England during the Industrial Revolution and referred to the recent wave of land requisitions and dispossession as a new "enclosure movement" (*quandi yundong*). Official and scholarly estimates put the number of "landless peasants"—that is, rural residents who have lost all land to requisition—at somewhere between 40 and 70 million and the number grows by approximately 2 million each year.⁷⁶ Most of the villagers losing land to requisition have little to no social safety net to support them. Some of them become part of the so-called "floating population," which has ballooned from 21.4 million or 1.9% of the population in 1990 to 221.4 million, or 16.2% of the population, in 2010.⁷⁷

While Chinese researchers focus on how the "enclosures" (i.e., land takings) benefit economic development by spurring urbanization,⁷⁸ it may be just as important to reflect on the political effects of the social transformation that is occurring in its wake. The regime transitions literature suggests that urbanization enhances a country's democratic prospects. "A huge peasant

⁷⁶ McDowell and Morrell 2010; Muldavin 2006; Tong 2012.

⁷⁷ "Press Release on Major Figures of the 2010 National Population Census" 2011.

⁷⁸ E.g., Jiang 2007; Yang 2010; Yu 2004.

mass,” wrote Barrington Moore, “is at best a tremendous problem for democracy.”⁷⁹ Though Moore based his argument on the experience of early-modern England, more recent accounts corroborate his idea that “the elimination of the peasant question through the transformation of the peasantry into some other kind of social formation appears to augur best for democracy.”⁸⁰ Villagers do not tend to lead democratization movements and in China they provided the social basis for the Communist takeover of power.⁸¹ The vast majority of commentators agree that democracy’s staunchest advocates live in cities, not villages.⁸² The massive scale of land takings is thus accelerating China’s de-peasantization and making it harder to sustain the argument that China has far too many peasants to entertain the idea of democracy.⁸³

Not all urbanization is the same, though. While some of the dispossessed villagers join the ranks of the urban middle class—the social strata most often identified with democratization movements in late-developing countries, many do not.⁸⁴ Facing discrimination in education and hiring, migrant laborers tend to take poorly paying (and often dangerous) manufacturing and service jobs. They are “in the city but not of the city.”⁸⁵ To borrow Eugen Weber’s description of the nineteenth-century French peasantry: they are “strangers in a strange land.”⁸⁶ They were builders of the monumental Olympic buildings but were cleansed out of the capital in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.⁸⁷ Increasingly, however, they seek to protect and advance their

⁷⁹ Moore 1966, 420. The rest of the sentence reads: “...and at worst the reservoir for a peasant revolution leading to a communist dictatorship.”

⁸⁰ Ibid., 422.

⁸¹ Bianco 1971.

⁸² E.g., Bellin 2000; Reuschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992; Huntington 1993.

⁸³ Kelliher 1993.

⁸⁴ Huntington 1993.

⁸⁵ Chan 2011.

⁸⁶ Weber 1976, 282.

⁸⁷ Bu 2008.

(property) rights, as evidenced by the large number of protests against unfair land takings and demolitions. Therefore, while we do not anticipate the instability stemming from land expropriation to directly threaten Communist Party leadership, it is no surprise China's leadership has expressed alarm at the political consequences of unfair land requisition and has formally called for reforming the land requisition system and increase the share of proceeds going to villagers.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Hu Jintao 2012.

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