

The Landlord State*

Land Arbitrage and the Refashioning of Chinese State-Society Relations

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Abstract

The Chinese party-state has undertaken a sprawling project to rebuild the state and re-fashion state-society relations, seeking to establish local governments as the sole landlord of the country's rapidly expanding cities by expropriating existing landholders and regulating urban developers, all while financing the state using land rents. To turn itself into a "landlord state," and to install local governments as its representatives, the Chinese state brought to bear an impressive toolkit of coercion, economic incentives, and institutional restructuring. These ambitious efforts have had divergent effects on different aspects of state-society relations: the state was unable to sustainably expropriate China's many landholding peasants at the steeply suppressed prices it sought, but it was able to ensure that real estate developers—China's premier business sector—paid substantial sums for land and showed a modicum of deference to government regulations. I argue that the state was ultimately more effective at regulating businesses than expropriating peasants because coercion proved too costly, leaving the state to lean on economic incentive and institutional restructuring techniques ill suited to expropriative ends.

When China began its reforms in the late 1970s, every meaningful economic entity in the country was a part of the party-state. A decade later, when China began to sell land use rights, the party-state's grip on economically important actors had weakened, but remained impressive: urban factories were overwhelmingly state-owned and rural industry was often owned by local governments (as township and village enterprises); housing in cities was generally under the control of state-owned work units. The leaders of all these economic units, as well as the village collectives that owned rural land, were subject to appointment by Party authorities. Nevertheless, when the real estate industry took off in 1992, the Chinese government quickly discovered that its many tentacles were not acting in concert. State-owned enterprises undertook land transfers with no regard for law or local political authorities; a multitude of local political authorities in each jurisdiction claimed the right to sell land use rights; village collectives attempted to transfer the non-transferrable land they owned; and state-owned bank branches funded all this without informing their superiors. China's omnipresent state was so large and uncoordinated that its leaders had only the bluntest instruments to control developments.

Recognizing that its authority was being undermined by the markets it was creating, the Chinese state launched an ambitious program to refashion state-society relations. This "landlord state" project sought to designate local governments as landlords, expropriating for state ownership the land of hundreds of millions of peasants and urban workers at the lowest possible prices, then selling the use rights for that same land on to developers at a steep markup; the price differential would bring in mammoth profits for local governments. In short, the state sought to assert ownership over all urban and urbanizing land in China, and to use this new claim of state authority to extract revenue from peasants, urban residents,

and businesses in the real estate sector. To realize this ambitious agenda, the Chinese state rebuilt itself: it reallocated decision-making power within the government and created new decision-making institutions; it experimented with coercion and inventive economic incentives to implement the decisions of those institutions. The “landlord state” project nonetheless met only mixed success in its effort to transform state-society relations: those already in possession of land were able to bargain for increasingly generous terms that drove down government profit margins, but the state *was* able to bring under much more substantial state control the erstwhile freewheeling market in which real estate developers operated.

The Chinese party-state undertook the “landlord state” project with ample societal penetration; it was practically everywhere. Instead of building out the state’s reach, China rebuilt its state to be more capable of controlling its own limbs. This entailed, first and foremost, significant reforms to decision making within the party-state. Local governments designed new decision-making institutions that clarified lines of authority and ensured that coordination across party-state entities was under the control of authoritative personages. Local and central governments, meanwhile, developed a pair of decision-making heuristics— institutional shortcuts that simplified decision making and increased the legibility of cadre behavior to higher levels of government—to guide land takings (land banking) and land sales (land auctions). Along the way, the Chinese state drew on traditional methods of state building, edging rural areas away from indirect rule and towards direct rule¹ and creating bureaucratic capacity to create and regulate new markets.² But in this Chinese case, most of

¹ [Migdal, 1988, Tilly, 1992]

² See especially [Skowronek, 1982, Vogel, 2018, Fligstein, 2018], as well as [Polanyi, 2001, Amsden et al., 1994].

the relevant parties were already under direct bureaucratic rule; much of the state's efforts were thus focused on rebuilding itself by untangling the bureaucratic organizational chart to clarify how decisions would be made.

Actually building land markets, imposing state control, and extracting revenue required more than just making decisions; it required seeing to their implementation. While coercion—the use or threat of implementation by force—was attempted in China much as it has been attempted in so many other state projects,³ it met with only mixed success. Although state coercion reduced corruption among state agents, its application against landholders—peasants as well as urbanites—and business interests proved so costly as to be unsustainable. Instead, Chinese governments at the national and local levels used their control over the labor and capital markets, as well as the land market itself, to guide behavior. In highlighting the interactions between state intervention in the labor, capital, and land markets, I build on a large but siloed literature that has considered each of these markets separately.⁴

The central argument of this paper is that this collection of techniques yielded varied and surprising patterns of state-society relations when used by the state to expand its authority over different parts of society—landholding peasants and urbanites, as well as real estate developers. The failure of coercion to sustainably expropriate land at bargain-basement prices, as well as the state's failure to use widespread coercion to discipline real estate developers, left the state with limited options. For land in the state's possession, new decision-making institutions within the party-state could substantially improve the state's

³ [Tilly, 1992, Scott, 1998]

⁴ [Shih, 2008, Huang, 2008, Solinger, 1999]. [Rithmire, 2017] is the best effort I am aware of to understand how government interference in the land and capital markets is interrelated.

bargaining power, as was the case for land sales to developers. But for land still in the hands of peasants or urban residents or already transferred to real estate developers, local governments were left to use economic incentives to coax societal actors into compliance with state edicts. Economic incentives in the land expropriation process inherently undermined the goal of expropriation: that is, low compensation. But economic incentives for real estate developers proved much more feasible, drawing on the complicated web of state interventions already underway in the labor and capital markets, as well as the new interventions being built in the land market. The result was a surprising pattern of state-society relations: while the state was unable to expropriate landholders at the low prices it hoped for, it *was* able to extract high prices from real estate developers and discipline them into rough compliance with urban planning.

This paper thus contributes to the literature on state-society relations, as well as the literature on how states are rebuilt to manage changing economic environments. By looking at a state with already high societal penetration facing the strain of a rapidly marketizing economy, I highlight the key role bureaucratic reforms and economic incentives can play in expanding the state's authority vis-a-vis society. Moreover, the different strategies used by the Chinese state to expand its authority over the multitudinous population of small landholders (rural and urban) and the businesses involved in real estate development help us gauge the state's ability to change those relationships. In comparative context, these findings hint at potentially distinctive characteristics of state-society relations when it comes to property rights, especially when certain societal actors have *de facto* control over assets that the state is seeking; in the Chinese context, these findings give us a rare opportunity to compare state relations with small landholders, especially peasants, and state relations with

businesses, especially the powerful real estate interests.

This paper begins with a brief effort to contextualize my findings in the literatures on state building and state-society relations before proceeding to a review of the sources and methods that support its argument. I then treat, in turn, how the project to build China into a landlord state rearranged decision making and the tools developed to implement the resulting decisions.

1 A Political Science Context for State Rebuilding and State-Society Relations

The “landlord state” project stemmed from China’s gradual state-led transition from a planned to a market economy. As political economists have long recognized, the creation of markets often requires political intervention; likewise, a significant expansion of the state’s authority over society is often necessary to regulate markets once they have come into existence.⁵ China was no exception.

Rebuilding state institutions to regulate new economic organizations is challenging. As Stephen Skowronek argues in his influential treatise on American state building, pre-existing state institutions often resist the creation of new, competing institutions.⁶ With the “landlord state” project, the Chinese state sought to push aside the key state economic actors of the planned economy era—state-owned enterprises and rural collectives—and instead empower local municipal and county governments. Unsurprisingly, state-owned enterprises and

⁵ [Polanyi, 2001, Vogel, 2018]

⁶ [Skowronek, 1982]

rural collectives put up a fight. Local governments won out in a battle of attrition, but their victory has been slow and painstaking.

Not only did the state rebuilding in response to marketization pit local governments against “socialist land masters,”⁷ it also challenged urban local governments to expand their authority over peasants and over newly created real estate development companies. States have long sought to extend their authority into the countryside and to regulate businesses. The Chinese state drew on familiar strategies to mixed success.

Where states have sought to expand their authority over new populations within their jurisdiction, they have often begun by using coercion to impose direct rule, replacing decentralized, “traditional” authorities with centralized, bureaucratic ones. In Tilly’s telling, states developed increasingly sophisticated bureaucratic structures through which to impose direct rule on—and by which to directly extract revenue from—those previously governed indirectly through local or regional intermediaries.⁸ But, as Joel Migdal reminds us, the imposition of direct rule has been fraught with resistance, especially from the intermediaries who would lose out.⁹ The literature on state-peasant relations in early Reform rural China has tended to emphasize the impressive power of local governments to coordinate economic activity.¹⁰ But as this paper shows, when local governments sought to expropriate land, they had to bargain with intermediaries—that is, with village leaders. At least with respect to land takings, then, early Reform state-peasant relations more closely resembled a weak state facing an amalgam of localisms, as described by Vivienne Shue.¹¹ Much as Shue predicted,

⁷ [Hsing, 2010]

⁸ [Tilly, 1992]

⁹ [Migdal, 1988]

¹⁰ [Oi, 1992, Whiting, 2001]

¹¹ [Shue, 1988]

the government responded by attempting to impose direct rule, cutting out village leaders as intermediaries and imposing in their stead a top-down bureaucracy of government officials. A large literature has focused on the obliteration of individual peasant communities as a result of this reform.¹² Only Christopher Heurlin has explored how the use of coercion to expropriate villagers boomeranged,¹³ and his work only hints at the degree to which the state ultimately yielded ground—often quite literally. Indeed, the government failed in this effort to impose direct rule, ultimately seeking to strengthen village collectives and to continue working through village elites.¹⁴

Where states have sought to expand their authority over capitalists, they have often done so through both regulatory means and bargaining. The context in which the United States built up its regulatory regime in the late 19th and early 20th centuries bears significant similarities to contemporary China: a primarily agrarian society undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization sought to wrestle with the new regulatory challenges brought by powerful (and very corrupt) capitalists.¹⁵ But the American starting point was markedly different: America was governed by a state of parties and courts rather than China's top-down bureaucracy inherited from its days under a planned economy. While both countries had to create a new regulatory regime while navigating the obstacles set up by their extant governing institutions,¹⁶ the Chinese state did not have to build a new bureaucratic infrastructure. Rather than seeking to build autonomous bureaucracies,¹⁷ the Chinese state

¹² See, e.g., [Hsing, 2010, Chuang, 2015].

¹³ [Heurlin, 2016]

¹⁴ Village elites can sometimes deliver for the local government, see [Mattingly, 2020].

¹⁵ [Wiebe, 1967]

¹⁶ [Skowronek, 1982]. See also [Dobbin, 1994], who shows how railway regulatory regimes in the U.S., France, and the U.K. were all shaped by institutional inheritances from before the invention of the railway.

¹⁷ [Carpenter, 2001]

created new decision-making institutions to coordinate existing bureaucracies—that is, to rein in their autonomy.

In emphasizing the careful design of new decision-making institutions, my findings add to a growing body of work on authoritarian institutions. I show that power is distributed not only among nominally democratic institutions¹⁸ and through elite power sharing arrangements,¹⁹ but also between agencies and between party-state organs and society. I expand on the “fragmented authoritarianism” model that emphasizes the wide distribution of power under China’s authoritarian regime²⁰ by showing that the distribution of authority in the Chinese bureaucracy is itself a subject of intense political debate and thoughtful institutional design. While some in power strive to maintain a fluid “guerrilla policy style” with its aversion to standard operating procedures and bureaucratic regularity,²¹ others carefully fashion institutions with standardized decision-making procedures to “constrain power within a cage.”²² China’s relative success at imposing discipline on real estate developers rested on its creation of new decision-making institutions to ensure that the government acted as a unitary (monopolistic) landlord.

Even once they had learned to act as unitary actors, local governments still needed leverage with which to extract compliance from real estate developers. Historically, governments have granted institutionalized political concessions to capitalists in exchange for investment

¹⁸ [Gandhi, 2010]

¹⁹ [Svolik, 2012]

²⁰ [Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988, Lieberthal and Lampton, 1992, Mertha, 2009]

²¹ [Heilmann and Perry, 2011]

²² These debates over the distribution of power—sometimes embellished with intellectualism and sometimes straightforward power struggles—are a foundational and yet sorely understudied component of authoritarian, and especially contemporary Chinese, politics. A notable exception is [Yasuda, 2018], who analyzes debates within the bureaucracy over the appropriate scale at which to regulate food safety. Earlier work by Harry Harding goes farther, carefully tracking debates over how the entire party-state should be organized [Harding, 1981]. More typical are studies which treat the assignment of regulatory power as uncontested solutions to governance problems, e.g., [Hsueh, 2011, Yang, 2006].

and thus economic development.²³ The Chinese government has, largely, avoided such concessions of power.²⁴ Indeed, studies of economic regulation and political institutions in China have routinely turned up empty handed, bemoaning the failure of the Chinese state to regulate businesses in any effective or routinized manner.²⁵ My findings more closely match those of Yang Dali, who argues that the Chinese government has undertaken a relatively successful program of economic regulation during the Reform era by building up its bureaucratic capacity;²⁶ I build on his work by emphasizing how politically fraught were the institutional changes necessary to build up the state's regulatory capacity. In the case of real estate developers, I argue that the state in fact partially sidestepped the pitfalls of strengthening a corrupt bureaucracy:²⁷ it granted economic incentives to developers who complied with urban planning regulations by linking legal title for newly built housing to China's complex government schemes to control the labor and capital markets, in turn making key public services conditional on planning compliance.

The relative success of China's authoritarian regime at regulating businesses in the real estate sector, compared to its relative failure to expropriate peasants and urbanites in possession of small land parcels, suggests that state-society relations with respect to property rights may be particularly entrenched. Much as Western governments have found it much easier to put conditions on those buying government land than to expropriate existing landholders,²⁸ the Chinese government has found it much easier to dictate terms to developers

²³ See, e.g., [North and Weingast, 1989, Bates and Lien, 1985]

²⁴ [Tsai, 2007]

²⁵ [Yasuda, 2018, Fewsmith, 2013]

²⁶ [Yang, 2006]

²⁷ [Fewsmith, 2013]

²⁸ Compare the enormous difficulty early American governments had in taking land for public services with the relative ease with which homesteaders were held to their (minimal) commitments [Schultz, 1989]. For a Parisian case, see [Paccoud, 2016].

than to the mass of small landholders. Contrary to the arguments of those who expect it to be easier to extract revenue from landholders than from capitalists,²⁹ the physical possession of land appears to have helped peasants and urban residents bargain with the government; that this was their primary asset only furthered raised the costs of coercion, making them still harder to displace.

In analyzing how the local state in China has been built up through its management of urban land, I am fortunate to build on several earlier studies of the same subject. I depart from the geographic³⁰ and subnational³¹ comparisons that have structured these studies to emphasize the national scale and temporal evolution of the program to build China into a landlord state. In so doing, I highlight several national shifts in the institutions of land ownership, expropriation, and management that have led to seismic changes in practices on the ground but been largely overlooked in the literature's focus on subnational variation. I nonetheless draw heavily on the central insights of this earlier literature—that the location of land relative to the urban core has shaped the politics of its (re)development and that variations in local land management institutions and their outcomes have been stark.

2 Sources & Methods

This paper, and the broader project of which it is a part, draws on extensive participant observer, interview, and archival research. Between 2017 and 2019, I conducted participant observer research of a month or longer in government agencies and in the planning insti-

²⁹ [Bates and Lien, 1985]

³⁰ [Hsing, 2010]

³¹ [Rithmire, 2015]

tutes under their control at the national, provincial, and municipal levels as well as at a local developer doing urban redevelopment projects in Guangdong. Beginning in 2016 and continuing through the present, I have conducted hundreds of interviews with government officials, urban planners, developers, village leaders, lawyers, journalists, and others involved in the urban development process, trying to understand how they make decisions both in their day-to-day work on urban development and in the design and implementation of new institutions. These first-hand observations have been supplemented by archival research, both drawing on records I have collected or accessed in the field about the urban development process and drawing on records available through American library collections.³² Archival materials have been especially helpful for unearthing the politics of the 1980s and early 1990s, while my interviews and participant observer fieldwork have helped develop a sense of the work styles of the various stakeholders. Where possible, I cite published documents or at least materials that can be borrowed through the American library system; citations of Chinese sources in this paper are by number, with references listed in numerical order at the end of the bibliography.

The bulk of the fieldwork was conducted in Ankang (Shaanxi), Beijing, Dongguan (Guangdong), Guangzhou, Xi'an, and Xiamen. A smattering of interviews were also conducted in each of over a dozen other cities.³³ While this paper draws heavily on that fieldwork, it does not emphasize the locales in which fieldwork was conducted unless there is significant geographic diversity in the patterns observed. Since much of the government's program to build itself into a landlord state has been replicated across the country, this

³² Several such collections include extensive and extraordinarily informative internal (内部) materials that have leaked out from China over the years.

³³ This included multiple days of interviews in each of Hohhot, Yulin, Yan'an, Ji'nan, Qingdao, Nanjing, Yangzhou, Hangzhou, Fuzhou, Nanping, Shenzhen, and Kunming.

paper highlights those commonalities where they exist, while recognizing the substantial local variation that prevails on some specific aspects of the “landlord state” project. Given the complexity of that project and the limited space available here, the evidence provided—primarily tucked away in the footnotes—is necessarily only illustrative of the broader patterns I identify, not by any means an exhaustion of the sources on which these findings are based.

3 Making Decisions

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Chinese government decided that the problem with the land market was a surfeit of cooks in the kitchen. Those who held land sold it with abandon, even if they did not have the legal right to do so. Without even a primitive cadaster listing landholders,³⁴ the government was left without any revenue from these transactions. Almost universally under nominal party-state control, these landholders nevertheless disregarded prohibitions on transferring land. Local and national governments responded by clarifying who owned land, then creating unified decision-making institutions to decide how it could be transferred and used. To make the decisions of local governments more legible to their own leaders and national officials, relatively simple decision-making heuristics were developed to ensure that land takings and land sales would both maximize profits for local governments.

3.1 Decision-Making Institutions

In the early 1980s, local and national governments launched a series of campaigns and policy reforms to concentrate decision-making over land under unified government institu-

³⁴ For Shanghai, see [Source 57 (蒋如高, 2018), pg. 40]

tions. They began by seeking to make the government the sole purchaser of land and sole seller of land use rights. Indeed, by 1982 the nascent land market was a headache for senior Chinese leaders and local governments. Senior leaders were aggravated by villages bargaining for higher compensation when their land was requisitioned by the government—or simply reaping the profits from developing their own land.³⁵ Local governments were exasperated by state-owned enterprises buying and selling land illegally.³⁶

At the center, advocates of state investment sought to do away with often troublesome intermediaries in the countryside,³⁷ seizing all land for the state in a single constitutional amendment.³⁸ Although they were dissuaded from such drastic action, the 1982 Constitution nonetheless established that all urban land would be under state ownership; rural land was to be under indirect state ownership, formally in the hands of the “collective,” which was in turn led by Party-appointed (but generally native) cadres. Work units (单位) and individuals were expressly forbidden to rent or transfer land.³⁹

This reassignment of formal property rights and prohibition on land transfers did not eliminate the land market. State-owned enterprises continued to buy and sell land, in one case brazenly advertising the transaction in the local Party newspaper—much to the mayor’s indignation.⁴⁰ Policy continued to call for end users to bargain with village collectives to purchase land. State-owned enterprises and other state capital still found themselves paying dearly for land;⁴¹ municipalities were hard pressed to squeeze revenue out of the land under

³⁵ See, e.g., [Source 284 (程雪阳, 2013)]; [Source 471 (赵紫阳, 2004), pg. 209]

³⁶ See, e.g., [Source 69 (吴炳棠, 梁锦麟, 1983), pg. 47], for evidence Guangzhou.

³⁷ See [Shue, 1988, Perry, 1985] for more on the trouble village leaders could cause while functioning, in effect, as intermediaries in indirect rule.

³⁸ [Source 284 (程雪阳, 2013)]

³⁹ [Source 622 (中华人民共和国宪法, 1982), Article 10]

⁴⁰ [Source 323 (丁兆民, 1988), pg. 20]

⁴¹ [Source 477 (张青森, 1992), pg. 36-37]

their jurisdiction.⁴²

In the late 1980s, an alliance of land management bureaucrats in Beijing and municipal leaders wrested authority for localities to sell urban land use rights for profit—and with a monopoly.⁴³ Initially, decisions about leasing individual parcels were made at the pinnacle of power in Beijing, even for land to be sold in such faraway locales as Shenzhen, Shanghai, or Hainan.⁴⁴ Once such transactions had been legalized and had become politically mainstream, new national regulations provided some guidance on decision-making procedures, assigning the power to sell land to the Land Management Bureaus at the municipal and county levels.⁴⁵

This regularization of land transactions had the perverse effect of further undermining state control. By creating a legal market for land transactions, landholders were made aware of the stunningly high value of the land they held. State-owned enterprises and villages began to sell their land with ever more enthusiasm,⁴⁶ especially after the lawless burst of private enterprise let loose by Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Southern Tour. Egged on by central officials, local governments tried to fortify their monopoly over land sales through campaigns against the black market in land. But the problem was not simply non-governmental organizations selling land without government permission.

The problem was that all manner of government officials were authorizing the sale of land in the name of the government. In many cities, multiple agencies and district or township governments had been allocated formal authority to sell land.⁴⁷ These entities, meanwhile,

⁴² [Source 460 (邹玉川, 1992), pg. 2-3]; [Source 441 (衡阳市志, 1998), pg. 1405]

⁴³ See Wilson, Saul. "Reopening the Price Scissors: The Bureaucratic Origins of China's Statist Land Regime," working paper.

⁴⁴ [Source 344 (中共上海市委党史研究室, 2018)]; [Zhao, 2009, 108-110]

⁴⁵ [Source 319 (中华人民共和国城镇国有土地使用权出让和转让暂行条例, 1990)]

⁴⁶ See, e.g., [Source 490 (何清涟, 1998)]. For a more general discussion, see [Lin and Ho, 2005, Hsing, 2010].

⁴⁷ [Source 599 (秦德君, 2020), pg. 45] (Shanghai); [Source 214 (中共广州市委广州市人民政府, 1992)] (Guangzhou); [Source 470 (史贤英, 2010[1996]), pg. 57] (Beijing)

hived off companies to trade and develop land in their name.⁴⁸ Even the imposition of coordinated control over land by a vice mayor tended not to bring order, as other vice mayors, the mayor, and the party secretary would attempt to exercise control over land as well.⁴⁹ The result was a lively land market in which local governments most certainly did not maintain monopoly power.

To bring freelancing government bureaucrats to heel, local governments gradually established relatively autocratic decision-making institutions that concentrated power in the hands of the topmost local officials. Although they were cheered on by no less an authority than-General Secretary Jiang Zemin,⁵⁰ they did so in the face of fierce resistance from bureaucrats who wanted to maintain their authority to sell—and profit from—land in their own right.⁵¹ Ultimately, this entailed the concentration of power over land sales in the hands of Party Secretaries and Mayors. In municipalities that maintained (or reestablished) municipal control over land, this was realized through a collective decision-making committee or leading group chaired by the Party Secretary or occasionally the Mayor.⁵² In municipalities where the right to sell land was functionally if not formally devolved to district-level authorities, top district party and government leaders led such decision-making bodies.⁵³ Such institutional innovations were hardly universal. But, where implemented, these new, autocratic decision-making institutions ensured that the government would sell land as a

⁴⁸ [Duckett, 1998, 73-111]

⁴⁹ [Source 605 (詹仲德、杨桂荣, 1987)]

⁵⁰ [Source 507 (江泽民, 1994), pg. 2]

⁵¹ [Source 450 (梁广大, 1997), pp. 11-12]; [Source 618 (李子彬, 2020), pg. 173, 196]

⁵² This approach was pioneered by Zhuhai, see [Source 450 (梁广大, 1997)]. It was later adopted by Fuzhou [Source 646 (罗, 2004), pg. 18], Xiamen (interviews, 2019), Guangzhou [Source 647 (广州市土地管理委员会, 2012)], and Shenzhen [Source 618 (李子彬, 2020), pg. 173, 196], among others.

⁵³ This is the case in, for example, Qingdao (interview, August 2021) and Shanghai (personal correspondence, August 2021).

unitary—monopolistic—actor.

With control over land sales now under the thumb of top municipal leaders, several locales attempted to strengthen urban planning decision-making processes. In the early 1990s, urban planning restrictions had often been imposed on developers only haphazardly, leaving enormous leeway to developers to influence the setting or changing of restrictions.⁵⁴ Because these urban planning restrictions effectively determined the profitability of land,⁵⁵ they were of enormous interest to developers and municipal leaders alike.

Local governments developed three radically different approaches to protect government urban planning decision-making procedures from the pressure developers often brought to bear:

- a **legislative approach**, in which urban planning restrictions were incorporated directly into the municipal planning ordinance, necessitating the Municipal People's Congress's concurrence for any amendments;
- a **Progressive approach**, in which a pseudo-legislative Urban Planning Commission made up predominantly of non-governmental experts was established to draft and amend urban planning restrictions; and
- an **autocratic approach**, in which urban planning was folded into the autocratic land management system and placed under the personal control of the party secretary or mayor.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Interviews in Shenzhen and Nanping. For a history of the emergence of real estate developers in China, see [Choo, 2014].

⁵⁵ They entailed restrictions on the total floor area of the development, as well as its height, green space, etc.

⁵⁶ The three Guangdong special economic zones of Shantou, Shenzhen, and Zhuhai, respectively, adopted these three approaches through legislation from 1997 to 1998. See [Source 625 (汕头经济特区城市规

These divergent approaches reflected a long-running debate over urban planning decision making. The legislative approach made modifications to urban plans extremely difficult in a rapidly changing and fiercely competitive urban real estate market while fundamentally changing the distribution of power across institutions, drawing opposition from Planning Bureaus and sometimes even from local legislatures; it was ultimately only used sparingly and in the most sensitive of locations.⁵⁷ The Progressive and autocratic decision-making institutions were designed to respond relatively rapidly to changing conditions; cities seeking to strengthen urban planning tended to choose between these two models. The Progressive approach—drawing on a Progressive intellectual lineage that sought to create “independent bod[ies] responding to the flow of circumstances”⁵⁸—was deeply contentious. By detaching decision-making power from government officials embedded in hierarchical relationships and allocating it to experts (albeit often under the thumb of the Planning Bureau), it promised to reduce government corruption and improve the continuity and technical proficiency of policy;⁵⁹ by detaching decision-making power over urban planning from responsibility for municipal performance, which remained with the municipal leadership, it “left power and responsibility mismatched.”⁶⁰ Both models found their adherents. The Progressive model was implemented most thoroughly in Guangdong,⁶¹ although it was adopted in watered

划条例, 1997)]; [Source 624 (深圳市城市规划条例, 1998)]; [Source 623 (珠海市城市规划条例, 1998)], respectively.

⁵⁷ Indeed, Shantou ultimately repealed these provisions [Source 626 (汕头经济特区城乡规划条例, 2014)]. Several cities have used legislated planning restrictions for historic neighborhoods, such as Yangzhou [Source 642 (李济泰、侯载铭, 2005)] and Xi’an [Source 627 (西安历史文化名城保护条例, 2002)], while others have legislated ecological protection zones, such as Wuhan [Source 641 (武汉市人民代表大会常务委员会, 2013)].

⁵⁸ [Wiebe, 1967, 181]

⁵⁹ [Source 639 (李子彬, 2000)]

⁶⁰ [Source 635 (深圳市政府法制办, 2014)]. See also [Source 631 (董立利, 2002)].

⁶¹ [Source 628 (广东省城市控制性详细规划管理条例, 2004)]

down form elsewhere⁶² and hotly debated and rejected in still other locales.⁶³ The autocratic model, meanwhile, caught on in Fujian, where it was used to coordinate all aspects of urban development—land management, planning, and associated conflict resolution—in the hands of the only local official powerful enough to command every facet of the municipal party-state: the municipal Party Secretary.

While new institutions for making decisions about land transfers and urban planning restrictions prevented freelancing bureaucrats from undermining the government’s monopoly on land, hard-bargaining village collectives continued to drive up the government’s land purchase costs. Since the early 1980s, officials from the grassroots up to the top of the hierarchy had been frustrated by the need to bargain with village collective leaders—intermediaries—in order to purchase land. With the Land Management Law of 1998, the central government attempted to impose direct rule on villagers. No longer would the government bargain with the village collective—the nominal landowner—when requisitioning rural land; no longer would the government bargain at all: it would announce a compensation plan and invite comments, then proceed regardless of opposition.⁶⁴ This imposition of direct rule was, in a simplistic sense, wildly successful. Land prices fell and local governments took land at a theretofore unimaginable pace.⁶⁵

But the widespread expropriation of peasants and heavily suppressed prices led to enormous social unrest.⁶⁶ That unrest led, in turn, both to increasing compensation for peasants and to the gradual withdrawal of the government from direct rule. While the formality of

⁶² [Source 632 (山东省城市控制性详细规划管理办法, 2002)] (Shandong); [Source 633 (四川省人民政府办公厅, 2007)] (Sichuan); [Source 634 (四川省人民政府, 2007)] (Sichuan)

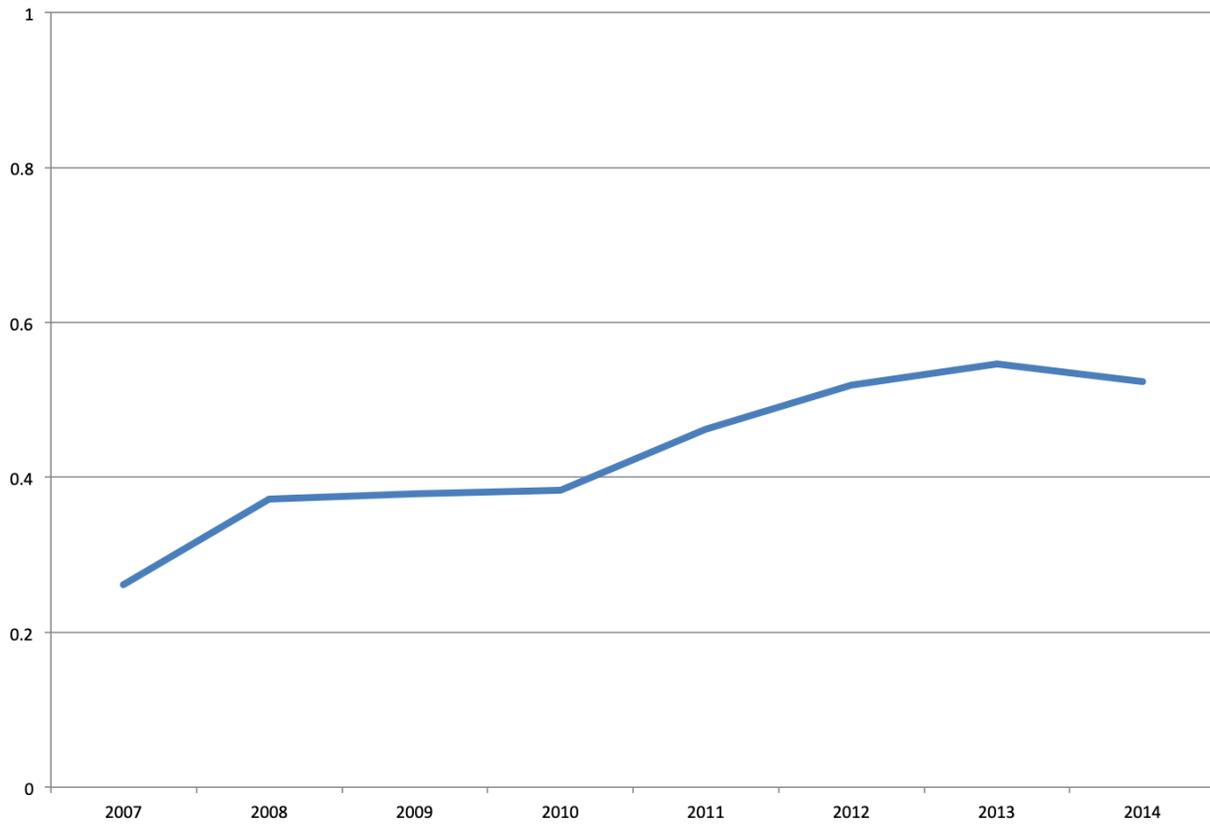
⁶³ [Source 629 (顾长浩 (编委会主任), 2002)] (Shanghai); [Source 630 (董立利, 2002)] (Xiamen)

⁶⁴ [Source 553 (土地管理法, 1998)]; [Source 565 (国务院, 1998)]

⁶⁵ [Source 645 (刘守英、周飞舟、邵挺, 2012), pg. 6]

⁶⁶ [Heurlin, 2016]

Figure 1: Land Takings Compensation as Share of Land Revenue



National level data is only available for these eight years. See [Source 557 (财政部, 2009), pg. 9]; [Source 558 (财政部, 2010)], [Source 559 (财政部, 2011)], [Source 560 (财政部, 2012)], [Source 561 (财政部, 2013)], [Source 562 (财政部, 2014)].

bargaining with village leaders was never restored to law (in part because of the concurrent implementation of village democracy), many locales resorted to bargaining with village leaders, and the 2019 revision of the Land Management Law required the consent of a majority of villagers for government land takings *and* allowed villages to transfer some land use rights on their own.⁶⁷ Even before 2019, compensation had risen dramatically, pushing down government profit margins (see Figure 1). In the long run, the imposition of direct land takings from villagers failed to increase government control over land and its pricing, and indeed resulted in a backlash that prompted the government to build up village collectives as bargaining units.

This effort to build up and bargain with village collectives was most pronounced in the redevelopment of villages-in-the-city (城中村, also translated as “urban villages”). Pockets of collective-owned village land marooned in state-owned urban areas resulting from shortcuts during previous land takings,⁶⁸ villages-in-the-city are often densely packed with lucrative tenements. On especially valuable land and with village collective organizations that had often leveraged that land to become major business enterprises in their own right, the politics of redevelopment could be particularly contentious. Once local governments came to see villages-in-the-city as problems, they attempted a variety of redevelopment strategies: everything from government demolition and relocation to redevelopment by the village collective organization itself.⁶⁹ Many of these redevelopment programs resulted in pronounced conflicts between village collective leaders and (some subset of) villagers.⁷⁰ Especially in

⁶⁷ [Source 567 (全国人民代表大会常务委员会, 2019), Section 63]

⁶⁸ [Buckingham and Chan, 2018]

⁶⁹ [Source 652 (陈晓莉, 2018), pp. 27-32]

⁷⁰ See [Bandurski, 2016]’s treatment of Xian Village in Guangzhou for one particularly famous example. See also [Mattingly, 2020].

Guangdong, local governments responded with extremely sophisticated multi-stage decision-making procedures that demanded supermajority consent from villagers as measured using several different voting procedures.⁷¹ Once again, new decision-making institutions sought to bring order to self-serving behavior by cadres, in this case village cadres.

Reforms to the land sales and urban planning systems began with the construction of new decision-making institutions precisely because decision making in all three realms had been made ineffectual by its fragmentation. For the management of land sales, the prevailing model was the imposition of autocratic rule by the top party or government leaders in a locale. By concentrating power at the very top of the local hierarchy, competing sources of land supply within the local government could be cut off.⁷² For the management of urban planning, several varieties of decision-making institutions competed for adoption. These approaches differed in their concentration of power and their deference to non-governmental experts, but all sought to clarify and regularize decision-making procedures. Not all locales implemented such institutional reforms to their land sales and urban planning procedures, but such reforms appear to have been prerequisite to establishing local party-state control over the land market.

Reforms to the land takings system also sought to simplify decision-making procedures. By doing away with bargaining with village leaders and taking land directly from villagers, reformers hoped to concentrate decision-making over land takings compensation in the government rather than in a bargained relationship between the government and its intermediaries. While initially successful, the backlash against imposed compensation rates

⁷¹ See, e.g., [Source 650 (黎羽龙、袁奇峰、梁小薇, 2019)].

⁷² The military and state-owned enterprises belonging to the provinces and the center remained a headache for local governments [Hsing, 2010].

was too great, and the government gradually backed down. Ultimately, in some locales, it saw the distributive implications of bargaining among villagers as a bigger problem than the high prices village collectives extracted from the government, and it developed new decision-making institutions for village collectives to ensure bargains with the village would reflect the consensus of villagers.

In sum, reforms to decision-making institutions were crucial to the state-building project that sought to extract revenue from urban(izing) land in China. These reforms were relatively successful when they sought to impose discipline on the government itself, as in land sales and urban planning. They were far less successful—indeed, counterproductive—when they sought to impose discipline on landholders and peasants specifically.

3.2 Decision-Making Heuristics

Two decision-making heuristics were initiated by local governments and promoted by the central government to guide decision-making in land transactions. Land banking of rural land was used to suppress the prices local governments had to pay to purchase land from village collectives; land auctions were used to maximize the prices local governments could charge for land when selling to developers. Both approaches were simple and legible enough that higher levels of government and the banks could evaluate local government compliance with relative ease.

Local governments in rapidly developing coastal regions recognized as early as the late 1980s and early 1990s that land in the city center or even on the urban fringe was much more expensive than taking land in distant rural areas. Convinced that urban expansion

would ultimately engulf these distant rural areas and eager to monopolize land supply, local governments began land banking—taking land from distant villages and waiting for its value to increase.⁷³ By taking land where it was cheapest, local governments could minimize conflict—in such areas, they were more likely to be able and willing to pay the market price. The approach was ultimately implemented not only through the goading of banks (see below) but also by the central government.⁷⁴

Likewise, local governments initially connived to sell land in the 1980s in large part to increase revenue, and therefore initially sold land at auctions or by inviting bids.⁷⁵ Because both auctions (拍卖) and the invitation of bids (招标) allowed governments to choose the highest bidder, they both served to maximize government land profits. Demands by the central government for a cut of the profits, fierce inter-jurisdictional competition, and rampant corruption in land sales reduced the amount of land sold at auction in the early 1990s.⁷⁶ But local and provincial governments began to reimpose auctions in the mid-1990s,⁷⁷ and by 2001 the national government was requiring auctions for all residential and commercial land sales.⁷⁸

Both these decision-making heuristics simplified decision making and increased profits, ensuring that the government would focus its attention on purchasing the cheapest land and would only sell land at the highest price the market would bear. Their implementation,

⁷³ See [Source 449 (梁广大 (口述者)、杨继绳、萧冬连 (访谈者), 2018), pg. 340-341] (Zhuhai); [Source 130 (王安德, 1990), pg. 9] (Shanghai)

⁷⁴ [Source 455 (国务院, 2001)]

⁷⁵ This began a year earlier than widely recognized, in 1986. See [Source 435 (广州市房地产管理局, 1990), pg. 82].

⁷⁶ See [Source 464 (李元, 2002[2001]), pg. 19], [Institute of Finance and Trade Economics at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Institute of Public Administration, 1992, par. 5.79-5.85]

⁷⁷ See, e.g., [Source 420 (浙江省人大常委会, 1993)] (Zhejiang); [Source 501 (中国广东省委、广东省人民政府, 2008[1997]), Section 3] (Guangdong); [Source 578 (福建省人民政府, 1993), Section 11] (Fujian)

⁷⁸ [Source 455 (国务院, 2001)]

however, still required the use of coercion and leveraging of government interventions in the factor markets for land, labor, and capital.

4 Implementing Decisions

The failure of reforms to decision-making institutions to force compliance from villagers begs the question of why reforms to *internal* governmental decision-making institutions could discipline both cadres and the real estate sector. The answer lies in a handful of inventive strategies the state used to implement its decisions. Not only did the state resort to coercion, but it also leveraged systems of government control it had earlier created in the capital and labor markets. These same strategies were put to use against landholders, albeit to much more mixed success.

Decision-making heuristics (land auctions and land banking of rural land) provided shortcuts to increasing government profit margins and made local government behavior more legible to the state's internal coercive (disciplinary) apparatus. The legibility of these heuristics made it easier for higher levels of the state hierarchy to impose conformity on local governments, both through coercion (in the case of land auctions for land sales) and by leveraging government control over capital markets (in the case of land banking for land takings). Combined with clear lines of authority and decision-making heuristics, the mixture of coercion and government intervention in factor markets was relatively successful at disciplining state agents.

When it came to developers, a much more passive implementation strategy was put to use. Because developers had to purchase land use rights, increased discipline in internal

government decision making allowed the government to establish a monopoly, while clarifying the property rights developers could buy and the process by which they could buy them. Making sure developers did not exceed the property rights they'd purchased was more challenging. Coercion was undermined by a web of corrupt ties between would-be coercers and developers, but a modest regime of inspections nonetheless underpinned passive enforcement which leveraged government interventions in the land and labor markets, especially the *hukou* system, to incentivize developers to comply with government decisions. Because housing with legal title came with enormous public service benefits, its market price was sufficiently higher to incentivize developers and consumers to operate within the state's urban planning regime.

The implementation of decisions was markedly less successful against individual landholders, including villagers, than against developers. Because villagers did not generally have the corrupt ties to undermine the coercive apparatus, coercion was used much more freely. But the use of coercion inherently created social instability, causing the state to withdraw from coercion and yield ground on the unilateral right it claimed for making decisions about the disposition of landholders' assets—in effect, granting villagers economic incentives to accept more limited state land takings. Meanwhile, the very government interventions in the labor market that had facilitated state control over developer behavior created a massive black market in untitled housing on village collective land in urban centers, further undermining the state's ability to make decisions about land use and urban planning. Ultimately, then the very tools of government self-discipline and government interventions in factor markets that bolstered the state's authority vis-a-vis developers undermined it with respect to far less powerful individual landholders, peasants and urbanites alike.

4.1 Coercion

Given the literature on state building, it should be unsurprising that that the Chinese government has made ample use of coercion to implement the decisions made by the new institutions outlined above. To make decisions and allocative heuristics binding on bureaucratic subordinates, the Party's Discipline Inspection Commission has been brought in; to enforce decisions against developers, sophisticated inspection protocols have been put in place, backed up by the threat of demolition or expropriation; to enforce land takings against landholders, a sprawling security state has been bolstered to violently expropriate land.

The use of coercion against Party apparatchiks has been comparatively successful. After a protracted socialization process⁷⁹ in which the allocation of land use rights by auction was gradually expanded, a final push for universal adoption was initiated in the early 2000s. When the State Council's order that localities sell commercial and residential land by bidding or auction was poorly implemented, it mimicked Guangdong's earlier approach⁸⁰ and doubled down with promises of enforcement from the Party's Discipline Inspection Commission⁸¹ and the government's Ministry of Supervision.⁸² This campaign-style enforcement on cadres was later institutionalized through the establishment in 2004 of a National Land Inspection system (国家土地督察制度)⁸³ and in 2006 of an Urban-Rural Planning Inspectorate (城乡规划督察员制度),⁸⁴ both of which referred cases to the disciplinary apparatus. While these coercive systems accomplished their immediate goals—the imposition of formal (if not

⁷⁹ See [Manion, 1992] for a theorization of such socialization processes.

⁸⁰ [Source 501 (中国广东省委、广东省人民政府, 2008[1997]), Section 3]

⁸¹ [Source 643 (中国共产党中央纪律检查委员会第七次全体会议公报, 2002)]

⁸² [Source 644 (国土资源部、监察部, 2003[2002])]

⁸³ [Source 649 (国务院, 2005)]

⁸⁴ [Source 648 (仇保兴, 2008)]

honest⁸⁵) land auctions on localities and the protection of arable land and green space—they did not fully root out corruption and insubordination by any means.

The use of coercion against developers has run up against the persistent particularism that has characterized Chinese state-business relations.⁸⁶ As Joseph Fewsmith argues, this particularism has undermined political reforms that seek to impose regulatory order on state-business relations.⁸⁷ Indeed, national law and a multitude of local variants have long provided for the demolition or seizure of construction that violates urban planning,⁸⁸ Actual demolitions have been exceedingly rare, however, because developers lobby and bribe local governments intensively to forgive or—more often—issue monetary sanction for their transgressions of urban planning restrictions.

The coercion used against small landholders, both villagers and urban residents, has been far more violent. That violence, however, proved self-defeating and ultimately led to a significant retreat of the state from its initial ambitions of monopolizing land supply and unilaterally imposing compensation prices during land takings. The conflicts created by compulsory land takings after bargaining with village collectives was eliminated by the Land Management Law of 1998 contributed to the expansion and rising importance of China's sprawling coercive apparatus.⁸⁹ While violent land seizures became remarkably common, the violence involved in taking land itself reflected a failure to preserve social stability. Because local officials were under increasing pressure to maintain social stability, they increasingly

⁸⁵ [Cai et al., 2013]

⁸⁶ [Pearson, 1999, Wank, 2001, Hou, 2019]

⁸⁷ [Fewsmith, 2013]

⁸⁸ [Source 651 (中华人民共和国城市规划法, 1989), Section 40]

⁸⁹ [Wang and Minzner, 2015]. See [Greitens, 2017] for a competing perspective that nonetheless confirms increasing government investment in the coercive apparatus.

yielded to the demands of landholders rather than resorting to violence to expropriate them.⁹⁰ Moreover, the government increasingly turned to “buying stability” by simply paying off malcontents, which naturally increased the number of complainants seeking a payoff.⁹¹

The failure of coercion to force landholders to accept the state’s claims to all land, urban and rural, undermined the state’s effort to control land supply to urban areas. In sprawling major cities, the government was unable to provide new downtown land because existing landholders refused to sell. This was especially pronounced in Guangdong, where the conversion of agricultural land to urban use was gradually throttled,⁹² forcing local governments to find land that could be redeveloped. Municipal governments, using the new village-level decision-making institutions outlined above, allowed villages to bargain directly with developers for redevelopment. However, village collectives are not monolithic; although the new decision-making institutions required a supermajority of villagers to agree to redevelopment, they did not require unanimity. This once again forced the question of coercion: could the overwhelming majority of villagers, who had voted for redevelopment, impose their will on the minority? While some northern cities concluded that such land takings would be “in the public interest,”⁹³ a lively public debate ensued in Guangdong. Despite intense lobbying from villagers and developers exasperated by holdouts impeding lucrative redevelopment projects, Shenzhen ultimately rejected a proposal to import Hong Kong’s laws permitting compulsory land takings from the minority if an adequate supermajority of owners concurred.⁹⁴ Guangdong’s High Court, meanwhile, issued guidance to the province’s courts to

⁹⁰ [Heurlin, 2016]

⁹¹ [Lee and Zhang, 2013]

⁹² [Source 638 (许青青、冯建奎, 2018)]

⁹³ Interviews

⁹⁴ [Source 636 (张小玲, 2016)]

reject all cases seeking to impose the will of a majority of landholders on the holdout minority.⁹⁵ This extremely deferential interpretation of property rights—far more deferential than in, say, most American condominiums—reflected just how radioactive coercion against landholders had become.

While coercion was relatively effective at enforcing a modicum of compliance on the government’s own agents, it proved insufficient to bring those outside government—developers and landholders—into conformity with the government’s schemes. Developers were able to buy their way out of coercive punishment, while the social instability that resulted from imposing coercion on landholders was enough to put the government off the project.

4.2 Leveraging Government Control of Factor Markets

The government was, nonetheless, able to impose its will on developers to a remarkably large degree by pairing its extant systems for intervening in the labor market to its new interventions in the land market. Those same interventions, however, created a profitable opening for villagers to exploit their periurban and urban landholdings, thereby undermining government control over urban(izing) land. Similarly, state control over the capital market helped finance urban development and enforce the decision-making heuristic of land banking on local governments.

Within the land market, the government’s control over regulatory approvals as well as land supply allowed it to coax developers into compliance: developers knew that if they crossed the government, they could be effectively frozen out of future development projects.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ [Source 637 (广东省高级人民法院, 2012)]

⁹⁶ Interview in Guangzhou

If and when local governments made compliance with urban planning restrictions a major goal, developers often understood that there would be significant long-term costs for non-compliance.

The degree of government intervention in China's labor and capital markets rival that in its land market. The *hukou* household registration system classifies residents into locals and outsiders, granting additional public services—including pensions, health care, and education—to locals and denying them to outsiders.⁹⁷ Because local household registration was increasingly granted in exchange for purchases of housing with legal title in the late 1990s⁹⁸ and because purchases of such legally titled housing later came to be linked to school access,⁹⁹ legal title came to vastly increase the value of urban housing. As a result, developers were desperate for legal title for their properties, and were willing to comply with government urban planning restrictions simply to gain legal title. When they violated urban planning restrictions, they viewed legal title as valuable enough that they would lobby the government to fine them faster so that legal title for their properties could be issued more expeditiously.¹⁰⁰ Faced with well-connected developers, it proved easier to withhold title than to expropriate illegal constructions.

While the enormous value of legal title coaxed developers to comply with government restrictions, it created a secondary market for those who either did not want or could not afford legal title. Sometimes this market was satisfied by formal sector developers who purchased land cheaply and violated planning restrictions freely when they knew that their

⁹⁷ [Solinger, 1999]

⁹⁸ See, e.g., [Source 640 (巫伟、王东江, 1999)]

⁹⁹ [Zheng et al., 2016]

¹⁰⁰ Interview in Shanghai Pudong, 2019.

clients did not want legal title.¹⁰¹ But far more often, this market for housing without legal urban title was satisfied by villagers who used their housing land—or sometimes what was supposed to be agricultural land—to build dense tenement communities. Taken to particular extremes in cities as diverse as Xi’an, Taiyuan, Xiamen, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, but evident even in obscure county seats, these nominally rural houses could reach ten- to twenty-stories tall. In flagrant violation of urban planning and land use regulations, such village-in-the-city enclaves have thrived due to their comparatively low prices, a product of the hukou system’s association of public services with legal title.

Government control over the capital market closely resembles its control over the land market. As with land takings, the government attempts to impose a monopsony on the purchase of capital (the receipt of deposits); as with land use rights sales, the government attempts to maintain a monopoly on the sale of capital (the issuing of loans).¹⁰² Not only does the resulting suppression of interest rates on deposits result in capital pouring into the comparatively profitable real estate market, thereby financing developers’ land purchases from the government, it also allows the government to divert loans to projects of its choosing. In the 1980s and early 1990s, local governments had substantial latitude to guide bank loans to their own—often insolvent—projects.¹⁰³ Reforms in 1997 put local bank branches under central control, reducing distortions in the capital market and leading to increasingly market-driven behaviors by banks. Led by the China Development Bank, itself attempting to shed a reputation for lax lending practices, banks encouraged local governments to take cheap rural land to build up land banks, which could in turn be used as collateral for loans to pay

¹⁰¹ Interviews and personal observation in Xiamen, 2019.

¹⁰² In the case of Chinese capital markets, state arbitrage has been lumped under the term “financial repression.”

¹⁰³ [Shih, 2008]

for land development and basic infrastructure.¹⁰⁴ What had begun as part of an effort to introduce discipline into banks' loans to local governments culminated in 2001 with a central government directive to banks that they support land banking operations with loans.¹⁰⁵

The use of government interventions in the capital and labor markets to impose government control on the land market hints at the quite unusual nature of the Chinese economy. While everything—including government power—is readily available for sale on the market, the crucial factor markets in labor, capital, and land are all heavily controlled by government intervention. That intervention, moreover, is not static; it is constantly adjusted in order to attain policy goals large and small, not the least of which is the maintenance of party-state control over the economy.

5 Conclusion

Those market interventions, combined with the state's coercive apparatus, have been used in an effort to establish China as a “landlord state” in which local governments profit from a monopoly on the supply of urban land within their jurisdictions. The “landlord state” was envisioned by a sprawling government that had long since imposed direct rule on those it hoped to control. The failure of the Chinese state to act as a coordinated whole, however, motivated a protracted effort to develop new decision-making institutions and heuristics that could clarify lines of authority, as well as the use of government intervention in factor markets and coercion to implement those decisions.

The mixed success of the “landlord state” project, in turn, highlights the sometimes

¹⁰⁴ [Source 424 (国家开发银行史 (1994-2012) , 2013)]; [Source 478 (陈元, 2012)]

¹⁰⁵ [Source 455 (国务院, 2001)]

surprising variation in state-society relations across different societal groups under China's authoritarian rule. Despite the well-earned reputation of Chinese businesses for particularistic ties with local governments, the Chinese government proved relatively successful at extracting their compliance by offering lucrative economic incentives through the formal titling system and its links to government interventions in the labor market, namely the *hukou* household registration system. The government was significantly less successful at imposing itself as a landlord on the mass of urban and peri-urban landholders, whose often futile individual resistance to land takings collectively constituted such a threat to social stability that the government backed down, gradually increasing compensation and ultimately acknowledging their right to participate independently in the land market. This failure of coercion to extract widespread compliance from either real estate developers or small landholders suggests the limits of state power over society even under authoritarian rule, while China's mixed success at creating a "landlord state" by using economic incentives to make up for the shortcomings of coercion highlights how variegated state-society relations are.

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