

New House: livelihood, debt and imaginings of the rural landscape in Sichuan  
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draft March 30, 2010

Original Abstract: Two trends over the last ten years have totally transformed the physical appearance of western Sichuan: the conversion of mountain fields to forests, and the construction of new houses and “new settlements” (*xin qu*). While state policies of slope conversion and “rural urbanization” (*chengzhenhua*) directly account for much of this transformation, individual family decisions to build a new house have also changed the rural landscape in complex, profound, and unanticipated ways. What factors inform those decisions to build a new house, and how does its construction impact intra-family and community relationships? How does house building today compare to house building in the socialist period, and what can we learn from that comparison? What do new houses mean to local people, and how do they fit with broader state schemes to “civilize” the countryside? The authors explore these questions in a case study of house construction in one village, based on fieldwork there over the past seventeen years. They argue that new houses inscribe not only the changes in family power structure and patterns of consumption analyzed in recent anthropological literature on household space, but also new understandings of community, livelihood, and lifestyle arising from the scale of the transformation.

Touring the Xixi wetlands park on the outskirts of Hangzhou far from Sichuan, we passed through a beautiful but abandoned old village. I asked the boatman how people who lived in such a wetland found fresh water in the old days; as it turned out, he once lived in that village and he told me a story about his village and how it had changed:

Before the reform era, his village had a number of “traditional” practices that enabled them to live in this boggy area and maintain the clean water they needed for drinking and other uses. The water they used in their homes was carried from a place they had designated and recognized for its superior quality. Once in the home, it was used first for drinking and cooking, light cleaning and rinsing, and finally re-used for dirty cleaning—feet, floors, dirty clothes. These different uses were labeled *shang shui*, and *xia shui*, articulating a careful hierarchy of conservation. Dirty water or *xia shui* was never dumped near their protected water source. Perhaps most significantly, the village also had a covenant that no one should raise pigs. The water that flowed around the village remained healthy and fish abundant; fishing was their main livelihood. About the time of reform, they were given piped water from a municipal supply. The careful reuse of water began to end as did other ideas about waste. As the reform economy picked up, villagers discovered that they could make a lot of money raising pigs and there was no longer reason to refrain from pig husbandry for the sake of their water. Everyone started to raise pigs, not just for domestic consumption but for sale to the burgeoning urban markets. There were more pigs than people. The water turned filthy and the fish started to die and the wetlands were clearly stressed. In the late 1990s, the government stepped in to save the wetlands. Their answer was to remove the people from the villages to apartments outside the wetlands, and they ended fishing. The wetlands were made into a tourist attraction, and villagers were encouraged to find wage labor in the new economy--some but not all in the park itself.

The story neatly sums up one familiar path of rural transformation in the Reform era--from subsistence, to market wealth and its attendant pollution problems, to state-directed land expropriation and redevelopment, to the urbanization of the rural population; but the story also highlights the ways in which the house is not simply a passive reflection of changing economics, but rather an active factor shaping domestic practices and the ecology of village life. The new house is both emblem and agent of change, and house construction is emerging as a core site for contested aspirations and imaginings of rural China. What are the forces propelling new houses in Sichuan, what are the new ideas being expressed, and what do they foreshadow for the future of rural life in China?

Many would characterize the vast changes in the Sichuan countryside as expressions of the spontaneous successes of liberalized markets. Another way to think of the new house boom now sweeping Sichuan is as a government-led initiative to change the house, and thereby the life within it, from a holistic farming machine to a modernized wage-laborer's apartment. There are many arguments for why this may be a good thing, from both the environmental and quality of life perspectives: farming, especially where it is market-oriented, has caused environmental problems; wage labor can result in an overall higher standard of living; concentrated housing can benefit from more efficient development of municipal services and leaves more land available for other productive uses. But the new houses also have their costs--they have set off a cycle of competition that puts pressure on people to gain access to capital; and it leaves behind people whose profile makes it hard for them to find wage labor. Where houses are part of a resettlement policy, it undercuts the farming safety net; where municipal or regulatory services are poorly developed, the pollution problems are actually made worse. Moreover, the motives and imaginings underpinning this transformation are complex; We will argue that the new house is not simply a case of local aspirations driving grassroots incremental change, but a determined response to a constellation of government policies such as "Western Development" (*xibu da kaifa*), "farmland to forest" (*tuigeng huanlin*), "rural urbanization" (*chengzhenhua*), and the "socialist new village" (*shehuizhuyi xin nongcun*), aimed at a social re-engineering of the countryside.

### **From *wafang* to *loufang***

Our area of fieldwork, Ya'an Municipality in Western Sichuan, has experienced a massive rebuilding of rural houses. In Xiakou Village nearly every house has been rebuilt in the last six years, and that reconstruction has been one of the most important issues for each family.

The houses we encountered during our early fieldwork were nearly all single story homes built with local stone, wood, and the fired-clay black tile roofs for which they were named "tile houses" (*wa fang*). This "old house" was designed for agricultural production. People and foodstuffs moved through the house in a continual flow of cycles of production and reproduction. The house itself served as the center point of a series of concentric farming zones. The outlying areas were used for forestry and wild foods. Next in were the grain lands--the plots where families grew corn, rice, wheat and

rapeseed and soybean. Closest to the village were the vegetable gardens; here the largest variety of foods was grown for household consumption. The house itself was extended to contain livestock on its edges--pigs, goats, cows and chickens all lived under the same roof as their human stewards. Houses contained one or more large stone water tanks with stockpiled water for domestic use and fire control, and sometimes for holding fish to be eaten. Vegetables entered the back door where they were first cleaned with water either from the tanks or piped in by bamboo or plastic hose draining into a gully running under and between the houses. The back door led to the kitchen where food was prepared cooperatively over a fire--one wok for humans and a second for pig food that incorporated the vegetable cuttings and leftovers. Grains entered from the front, first spread or hung to dry in the courtyards and then processed and taken to storage bins in the central ancestral hall (*tangwu*). The hall and the kitchen held vats of home processed goods--salted eggs, bean pastes, fermented tofu. Firewood and grasses to be burned were also stored in the kitchen, along with seeds being saved. Twice a day, a basket of grass would arrive at the pig pen on the side of the house. The grass was tumbled to the floor, and (typically) the older generation would spend the morning bent in the low light of the pig pen chopping the grass for the pigs. The house was filled with the echoed beat of the chop, a domestic counterpart to the thump of the hoe in the field. Pigs were killed in the family courtyard by the village butcher with the voluntary help of neighbors and friends, one of many labors where work was traded cooperatively. The pork then hung in the kitchen to smoke with the fires that stoked the cooking woks. The house was adorned with food--pork and sausages hanging in kitchen, seed corn by the wok, and the front of the house strewn with braids of corn and hot peppers in streaks of red and yellow. Beans hung in special racks between the houses. Chickens wandered the courtyard by day and were put up in pens at night. Processed pig and human manure were deposited into a single pit below the pig pen from whence it was recycled out to the fields with great labor to renew the cycle. In the off hours, neighbors would circulate among the houses sitting in kitchens or on the covered porches and might share in the task of shelling corn or tending fire if it was appropriate. The center of any major social event was always a feast in the courtyard that featured the many fine homemade foods. Friends and neighbors chipped in to supply the bowls and tables, the cooking help, and the dish washers. Just as food moved from the fields and garden to the house where it was recycled back to fields as manure, people after their death moved from the house to the garden where they were buried and recycled into earth and reincarnated into life.

The old houses of Xiakou we encountered in 1991 still functioned as an agricultural vortex, but they had undergone radical transformations during the socialist period, most notably the full displacement of the hearth in the Great Leap Forward, and the fragmentation of the old spatial order of common *fengshui* and contiguous lineage housing in the rebuilding of the village after devastating fires in the 1960s and 1970s.

The houses we encountered during our first visit were old tools that had been returned to discrete and “scattered” families.<sup>1</sup>

As the economy changed over the next two decades, and people experimented with new livelihoods, awkward disjunctures emerged with new practices in these old-styled houses. The new coal burning stoves in the kitchen resulted in unsmoked rotten meat. New goat and cow dairy enterprises flooded the village with a sour smell and overflows of manure, and the nearby river bloomed with algae. Pig and human manure became problematic as the value of agricultural crops diminished, and as young men turned their attention to the wage economy, there was no need or inclination to carry all the manure to the fields. The advent of rat poison led to the accidental decimation of the cat population and the resulting pestilence was the end of soy bean production. Trash, which in the past was limited and biodegradable in nature (orange and apple peelings, peanut shells, paper wrappers, tobacco plugs) was first freely strewn and seen as an auspicious symbol of prosperity and abundance but later became a problematic plastic eyesore that was carried and dumped daily into the river.

These practical pressures on the old house in Xiakou grew alongside the broader trends analyzed by Yan Yunxiang<sup>2</sup> of the empowerment of youth and women through the wage labor economy, and the expression of those trends in the desire for new private domestic space. As we watched a new generation come of age in the village, young people and young women in particular began to want a new two-storied house (*loufang*) of stuccoed brick, concrete planks, glass windows, and an interior spatial arrangement designed for consumption rather than production.

But the new house is, of course, much messier than the neat sketch above might make it appear; there are many new houses and many complex forces and negotiations and imaginings at play in the construction of a new house. This paper aims to examine the next step in this story as homes have been rebuilt to incorporate new values and in response to new pressures. The house is not just a passive reflection of these trends but the new styles have generated pressures and trajectories of their own.

### **A typology of new houses**

Based on our fieldwork over the last few years we can induce an unsystematic typology of conditions surrounding new house construction in Ya’an :

A) The *independent house*, where individual families rebuild the old *wafang* into a new *loufang*. This is self-funded construction where villagers lend money to each other, and

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<sup>1</sup> In the “Socialist Hearth” we summarized changes in the home as part of the socialist project of integration into a national narrative and its general dispersion in the period of Reform. See <http://xiakou.uncc.edu/chapters/authority/hearthandstate.htm>

<sup>1. 2</sup> Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism [electronic Resource]: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

the underlying wealth comes from new opportunities (such as construction of the railroad to Lhasa) associated with the “Western Development” campaign. The motivation is expressed as keeping up with the times and in fact, it leaves some people very visibly marked by their inability to achieve this leap.

B) The *local resettlement house*, where the township government offers incentives for farmers in individual homes in outlying areas to voluntarily move down to other land managed by the village or to service districts. These incentives include a free plot to build on and one-time loans for house construction. In making their choices farmers weigh the convenience of living close to their cropland and other mountain resources against the more convenient access to schools and wage labor.

C) *Resettlement house for rural redevelopment* where the government mandates that farmers move into apartment blocks so that their homes and farmland can be entered into “circulation” for new business ventures. Here the farmers receive compensation or even a new job as their cropland is made available to new industrialized agricultural or tourism enterprises; at the same time they are given a loan which they need to pay off in order to own their new apartment.

D) *Resettlement house for major infrastructure* associated with Western Development, such as hydropower, where the government mandates farmers to move into “new districts”. Sometimes the new homes are close to the old home locations, and sometimes they are in entirely different locations. These resettlements are frequently but not always associated with total loss of former croplands and dependence on new livelihoods

E) *Resettlement house for earthquake reconstruction*, where the government uses the funds available for rebuilding to motivate farmers to relocate to central service zones or partner with private sources of capital to create a new kind of house. The same calculus exists as for rural redevelopment, but the potential coercion is greater. Farmers desperately need to rebuild, and in some cases feel that officials are using the opportunity to dispossess them from their farmland. On the other hand, some groups are using this opportunity to redesign rural life to take advantage of new green technologies and/or new urban wealth.

In the remainder of this paper, we will briefly examine these types of house building in order to provide some sense of the motivations, and the social and environmental costs and benefits of this major change in the rural landscape. While we will primarily pose questions for further investigation, we can also venture some preliminary conclusions highlighting the pressure points in this large social and environmental transformation.

## **The Independent House**

Xiakou has been transformed by the self-funded rebuilding of houses. The first large *loufang* was built by an orphan who had made a small fortune as a contractor (*baogong*)

*tou*) in the rock quarrying business. At that time, in 1998, the house reflected the large difference in wealth possible if one had the position of contractor as opposed to laborer. It stuck out like a sore thumb but mirrored the statistical data we had gathered for family incomes in the village. A few got rich first.<sup>3</sup> The house had new features never before seen in the village--it had a formal dining room and granite counter tops. The man who built this house seemed to be self-conscious about this departure from the communal egalitarian values of the past, and so he prefaced his house building project with another building project--he paid to build a communal water supply for the village, creating a tank for more reliable flow from the mountain springs above the village, and pipes to bring running water into each home. In this early case, and in the case of a common satellite TV feed provided by another contractor, providing a public good was a balance and precondition to building a new private space.

Wage opportunities grew steadily throughout the 1990s, but after 2000, two big changes radically changed life in the village--the farmland to forest policy and new wage opportunities created under the Western Development policy. Farming has become all but obsolete, persisting mainly as part-time forestry cash crop done by the middle generation and supplemental household food production done by the older generation.

Farmland to forest mandated farmers to replant the grain lands to forest uses; in this case they planted primarily bamboo. The labor requirements for bamboo are less and more seasonal in nature. While the income from farming was lessened (both as income and as subsistence goods), the drop in income was offset by grain payments from the state and new wage opportunities in construction work. Many people from the village have worked in rock quarrying in neighboring counties and in the railroad construction in Tibet. These jobs have required most of the young men and many women to be away from the village for long periods of time. Child care has increasingly devolved to the older generation and the new lifestyles have created greater needs for cash supplements.

While families began to accumulate savings from wage labor, the decision to build a new house was not an easy one. In addition to the issue of building costs, particularly the cost of materials, many older villagers felt that the new houses were not as comfortable (colder in winter and hotter in summer than the old house), and that the construction process was conspicuous and inconvenient for neighbors. As a result, while a few new houses were built after 2000, there was widespread hesitation to build until Spring Festival 2007, when a fire burned down three houses. In a stroke of irony, the fire was accidentally started by Old Wang burning paper money and incense at the ancestral altar. Still active at 95, Old Wang doggedly worked his garden plot, chopped pig grass, and fed the fire under the wok every day. He embodied and extolled the virtues of hard work, frugality, and self-sufficiency, and he scorned the leisure, mahjong, and consumption of the younger generations, yet the fire he accidentally set (and that others were too busy playing mahjong to notice) became the catalyst for the nearly total rebuilding of the village. Now the issue of safety trumped the cautious objections of the

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard, Pamela. "The Political Landscape of a Sichuan Village." Ph.D., University of Cambridge, 1995. p55

elders, and cost savings from bulk purchases of brick, sand, cement, and concrete planks encouraged nearly everyone to build a new house, making the construction of new private spaces in many ways a communal decision.

While the new houses establish private spaces, particularly individual bedrooms, the boundaries are fuzzy and there are plenty of “public” dimensions to private life in the new house. No longer built around the cycling rhythms of agriculture, the new houses give face to new aspirations of consumption, but also expression to the improvisations of extended social networks. The construction process itself called up networks of mutual labor exchange and loans that stimulated communal activities within the village, especially through house warming feasts but also through the revival of courtyard movies (*baba dianying*) and informal visits to check up on the progress of construction. Villagers borrowed money from as many sources as they could, including agnatic relations and urban connections.

On the one hand, house construction reinforces *renqing* networks of mutual aid. On the other hand, there is evidence that it may also have a corrosive effect. We encountered individuals who had borrowed amounts they were finding difficult to pay back. One man in his seventies lamented that he had to continue to work in hard labor to keep up. To those who are not paid back, there are frustrations too. In Rachel Murphy’s discussion of house building in Jiangxi, a village man laments the loans he has made that he knows will not be repaid, and comments “we build houses because this land has raised us. But when you think about it, it is dead money”<sup>4</sup> (2002, 111) Dead money, taken out of *renqing* circulation suggests that the high cost of new houses can ruin *renqing* networks. And if this indicates a transformation is underway where money becomes valued as “something to consume” instead of as “something to circulate,” bigger problems may loom on the horizon.<sup>5</sup>

The size of these new houses is striking, and also points to their social dimensions. The emphasis is on the structure; the interior is sparse by urban standards. Each is a unique configuration of bedrooms, kitchens, bathrooms and living spaces. They reflect the variety of kinship arrangements, for example one house dedicates much of its space for returning daughters to visit or even live. Some houses have urban-style apartments inside for those who live away most of the year but return for months at a time. For many of those who work away from home, the time spent away is often in harsh conditions. They live in tents and the work is hard, so time at home has become a reprieve centered on leisure. But since leisure is not just a private affair the new house includes new interior spaces for gatherings and for show.

The particulars vary. Now common is a dedicated television-centered living room, with an electric fan or an electric heater replacing the old charcoal brazier. These are usually placed above the altar room but not exclusively. It would seem to be a literal

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1. <sup>4</sup> Rachel Murphy, *How Migrant Labor Is Changing Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). p111

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Ellen Judd for her observation of this point of ethical shift.

layering of old moral networks (the family) with new translocal networks<sup>6</sup> --the regional and national network of the television and its ad hoc gatherings. The feasts that used to occur only in the courtyard now are celebrated both inside and outside. The gatherings around Mahjong are more flexible--rather than punctuating the major transitions of a close knit village lifecycle, they flow with the coming and going of kin and non-kin in a more flexible style. The bedrooms likewise accommodate these flows in an expression of the increasing importance of translocal networks.

While the original kitchen and pigpen often remain intact and continue to be used for many of their traditional uses, new apartment style kitchens have been added for the benefit of the foreshortened cooking needs of grown children with more tangential relationships to village agriculture. Either because they are working outside the home or because they are less invested in agriculture, they buy more meat and vegetables and even use "flavor packets" to shortcut the creation of traditional dishes and "convenience foods" to assuage the children.

Whereas the family manure used to be a scarce resource that was valued as a source of cropland fertility, now homes produce more manure than they want or need. Still, without a real plumbing system, the old toilet remains of necessity. New bathrooms have been added as both a convenience in a larger house and an emblem of modernity. One family put in a Chinese-style flush toilet and a western toilet in the upstairs "to give people a choice." Nevertheless, because there is no sewage treatment the additional toilets are being used for urine only because they drain into the open gullies. Showers, too, are now common and have individual coal-powered water heaters.

This transition has been accompanied by a round of new needs for cash--cash for the children's education costs, cash for house building, cash for food purchases where farming used to provide, cash for transportation for movements to school and to work, for energy--both for cooking as firewood has become scarcer and for greater electric needs. And as the family becomes more dispersed, phones and cell phones are more desirable. Where self-sufficiency and self reliance was the hallmark of the old home, the young are fully integrated into the consumer economy. Steady deep rhythms of agricultural production are replaced with the more staccato beat of movements into and out of domestic life, and the home is increasing a place for expanded and more costly notions of leisure.

We can show this increased dependence on the cash economy by comparing survey results from household surveys we carried out in 1992 with similar surveys repeated in 2004.<sup>7</sup> In 1992 mean family incomes stood at about 1600 yuan. Because of their dearth of paddy land, village families spent about 250 yuan a year to purchase the rice needed to feed themselves, while corn harvests were used in animal husbandry sidelines to provide a marginal income. At that time wage labor commanded a price of 8-10 yuan a

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<sup>6</sup> Translocal China, Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein eds. Routledge, London. 2006

<sup>7</sup> A more detailed summary of the 1992 results are in Leonard, *Political Landscape*, p. ???. The 2004 survey was carried out with the help of Zhang Jie and Che Lirong, students in Sichuan University's Department of Sociology.

day but was pretty sporadic. We have calculated typical annual expenses for an average family in 1992 at about 980 yuan including the cost of the rice. In 2004, the wage earning ability of families had increased perhaps as much as five-fold with the men earning 20-25 yuan a day and working more regularly. Corn was no longer grown but purchased to feed just the pigs the family would need for their own consumption. Families needed to spend roughly 1000 yuan to feed two pigs and the price of corn had gone from .3 yuan per jin in 1992 to .8 yuan per jin in 2004. Other livestock sidelines were largely now absent because of the high price of corn and new environmental regulations regarding animal waste. Rice was provided by the forestry project. Beyond the cost of grain, however, the domestic economy had significant new expenses to contend with. School fees and healthcare costs had risen precipitously. School fees for basic primary education had gone from 50 yuan a year to 1000 yuan. Additionally, families were investing more in higher levels of education for their children hoping to give them a better foothold in the new economy. In this period fuelwood had all but run out in the area, and each family now depends on burning coal to cook and heat water adding a new 35 yuan a month to a typical family's needs. While the electric bill is not a big burden, recently many families have installed phones at a cost of 25 yuan a month. Families still buy fertilizer for the bamboo and (small) rice crop, and piglets and vet bills are a significant expense meaning that despite the withdrawal from corn farming, the costs associated with agricultural production have actually gone up slightly in this period. Thus, by our calculations, total household expenses have gone from an estimated 980 in 1992 to 4660 in 2004 exclusive of transportation and increased food (not grain) purchases!

	<b>1992 family of five</b> Prices in yuan	<b>2004 family of five</b> Prices in yuan
<b>Income<sup>8</sup></b>	<b>1600</b> (1000 wage income +600 agricultural income)	<b>6000</b> (all wage)
Tuition/ school fees	50	1300
Medical expenses	130	600
Grain purchase	250 (rice at .4 yuan / jin)	1000 (corn at .7 yuan/ jin)
Energy (coal, electric) and phone	No data	900
Agricultural costs	550	660
<b>Basic expenses</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>4660</b>

From the above survey results we see that most of the increase in wages is devoted to expenses that used to be negligible. While the farmland to forest policy has meant more free time for men and women, wage labor for women and old people was still harder to find than for the young men and so many people simply had additional free time. While a wage earner usually is willing to contribute the bulk of his earnings to the family this is by no means a universal rule. Because some families are without a wage earner, or because in some families wage earners' contributions are minimal, there are individuals

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<sup>8</sup> Estimates based on observation, what families said of themselves and what they said of others, and knowledge of average daily wages.

in the village who have no recourse but to eke out a living from the land. It should be emphasized that with the wages earned by most of these families, it would have been very difficult if not impossible to support the whole family in an outside location where food and housing would need to be purchased. Workers traveling away tend to live in dormitories or tents unsuitable for families. Children and old people are almost always left in the countryside to help pay their way by raising pigs and garden vegetables, and to reduce living costs by dwelling in existing homes. This profile demonstrates that instead of replacing the subsistence economy, the wage economy has actually depended on it for the costs of reproduction while at the same time the agricultural economy has become increasingly dependent on the cash infusions from wage labor. There are income inequalities within villages that are made more visible by the construction of new houses. Families who cannot muster the capital to rebuild stand side by side the new houses in a jarring contrast separating for all to see those who have made it from those who have not. Some who have managed to build large homes struggle with the burden of debts. There is social pressure to keep face by rebuilding bigger<sup>9</sup> and the ensuing debt becomes an engine that keeps the middle generation increasing connected to wage earning and consumptive habits and even older people working at wage labor when they would prefer to retire.<sup>10</sup>

One friend, Suhui, made clear to me the kind of pressure such a trend creates. Born in Xiakou, she had married to a more remote village where wage opportunities come at a higher price. She had worked hard to create a livelihood that allowed her to remain at home, and actually resisted going out for wage work because she wanted to be close to her children. Despite the fact that her family made their living at farming, she still felt she had to build a bigger house. She borrowed from friends because she felt her children would benefit from a larger house. It was both a question of face—feeling embarrassed when her children’s friends would see their smaller old-style home and think that their family was not capable—and of practicality--the TV watching of her husband’s family impinged on her children’s ability to concentrate on their studies. Education has become much more important to rural families overall as they see their farming livelihoods disappear. Now there are several young adults who have gone on to higher education from the village, when in the 1990s there was only one young man who had completed high school. The new house, in her mind, was very much tied up with the new aspirations she had for her children--aspirations that were both material and social, for learning and achievement she felt had been foiled by the circumstances of her own youth.

The networks Suhui drew on were impressive. Not only did she borrow from us, her foreign friends, she was also able to borrow from a woman from the nearby town whose

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<sup>9</sup> Rachel Murphy also describes this phenomenon highlighting the connections between house building and the competition to find marriage partners, *How Migrant Labor Is Changing Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). 103-114

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Murphy's informant also notes that the wage economy is “like a drug; the more you go out, the more you spend and then you have to go out again” quoted in *How Migrant Labor Is Changing Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p111

friendship she cultivated when she worked for us for a brief period in 2008. This woman, significantly, had a respect for rural people that came from her many years as a sent-down youth, and she enjoyed the benefits of having a farming friend in the countryside--a pleasant place to visit, a source for better foods, and the joy of knowing someone whose life was different from her own. After Suhui was profiled on NPR in the United States as part of series on the changing life in China's interior (through her connection with us), she received a house warming gift from an inspired listener impressed by her hard working lifestyle and devotion to family--she was given a new washing machine! Suhui was thrilled with the spectacle her house-warming party was thus able to provide--family, friends and gifts from afar that she knew would be impressive to her neighbors.

Just as the borrowing and housewarming feast located the community within Suhui's new house, its spatial arrangement framed and positioned relationships. In the old house the ancestral hall (*tangwu*) was shared by Suhui's husband and his brother, who also took turns hosting their grandfather. Now the brother's old house stands awkwardly attached to the new structure, and the new house has both a separate *tangwu* and a spacious room for the grandfather; thus moving the symbolic locus of family authority to the new house was a shift in intra-family dynamics in Suhui's favor.

Perhaps the most striking design features of Suhui's house are the unusually large, nearly floor-to-ceiling windows that frame the family's relationship with the outside world. In all *loufang*, large glass windows (usually on the second floor) are novel departures from the old *wafang* design, and villagers enjoy looking out at the view. By contrast, the old house was a shelter, a place to gather around a hearth or table or television. Suhui's windows and the patio she created on the flat roof orient the family's and visitor's gaze outward, marking a new relation to the aesthetic landscape, which in turn is incorporated into the house. The room with a view expresses the aspiration for social "openness" (*kaifang*) that fits with the challenge of creating new livelihoods.

The rebuilt homes are big, but the size is not just about consumption, leisure, and achievement but incorporates ideas about morality, community, place, and new hybrid economies; these are not just individual but also social aspirations. While attracting prospective brides for the sons is clearly a consideration for many in the decision to rebuild, the pressures go well beyond this one factor. The old agricultural system has been undermined by low prices and central directives at a time when new opportunities offer hope. Villages that remain in place must contend with the need to develop new livelihoods, and have done so cooperatively without the complete abandonment of old ways--they continue to raise pigs and grow a garden, they have feasts and local networks of mutual help and exchange while at the same time more family members want and/or need to leave home for periodic employment.

The state has encouraged this growing trend of consumption by subsidizing the purchase of new electrical appliances, providing investment capital and creating employment opportunities within infrastructure development projects. The state is also pressuring villagers to develop their own businesses. Villagers in Xiakou were told that

to receive further grain payments related to the farmland to forest policy, they needed a new village plan to further develop their economy. Possibilities they have considered include bamboo processing, poultry lots, and tourism. The new social spaces they are carving out--rooms with a view, interior places to gather, movies in the courtyard demonstrate the benefits of spatial continuity as they contemplate their futures. But like the ecology of their homes, this has all the flavor of a transitional moment of suspension where the the grand scheme has yet to fall into place.

### **The Resettlement House**

Where the self-funded independent house reflects family aspirations enabled by wage labor, new houses built through resettlement are the creations of complex schemes involving negotiations among resettlers (*yimin*), various levels of state agents, policy entrepreneurs, and other outside business interests. While there are different kinds and conditions of resettlement they all share a common civilizing mission of improving the quality of “peasants” by modernizing both their material conditions and their thinking. In state imaginings of a socialist new village, the resettlement house, grouped in “new districts” (*xinqu*), is designed to relocate and reorient peasants, lifting them out of subsistence agriculture and developing in them a market mentality (*shichang sixiang*). Resettlement works through both construction and clearance; the new house/ new districts are neo-liberal spaces integrating the peasant with the market economy, and the cleared land can be reimagined as space open to investment in infrastructure, economic redevelopment, or ecological improvement.

Resettlement as ecological clearance under the farmland to forest policy usually occurs within the administrative village. The families living higher on the mountains are ever fewer but those who remain live in old houses and continue to focus on agriculture. Because they live farther from the road, it is harder to get to work, cash is scarcer, and it is more difficult to bring in the building materials for a new house. On the positive side, with fewer people around, the natural resources are more abundant and that eases the burden of making a living on the land. For example, a family that had dairy cows in the densely settled village along the river encountered problems because their manure was a nuisance to their neighbors, and because it flowed directly into the river, leading to fines for pollution. On the mountain, the manure is more easily moved to cropland and there are no close neighbors to be bothered. Furthermore, wild grasses are more abundant so it is easier to gather fodder. Still, the township government is pressuring those families who remain in these more remote locations to move down along the road as part of the farmland to forest policy to create an ecological buffer zone on the upper watersheds of the Yangtze River.

In the early 1990s many young men found their own way to move down through the practice of matrilineal marriages. Later the government incentivized the trend by offering free plots of land for house building to those who would move. By 2008, the village head had among his chief duties to encourage the remaining families to move down off the mountain. The policy has been increasingly ramped up over the last two years, but it encounters plenty of resistance, since those who remain already have their reasons

to stay--mainly their need and/or desire to continue to farm, and their fear of losing their land to expropriation by the state once they move away from it.

So while the local resettlement houses are physically the same as the independent *loufang* built on the original old house footprint, the conditions surrounding their construction are quite different because they usually involve a significant amount of negotiation with the state (even if in the familiar guise of the village head), and a greater change in the level of dependence on the cash economy and a change in local networks. Moreover, these relocations take place against the background of other resettlement schemes that provide cautionary tales for those weighing the move off the mountain.

### “New Districts”: Redevelopment and Resettlement

As noted above, the *resettlement house for rural redevelopment* encompasses cases where the government mandates that farmers move into apartment blocks so that their homes and farmland can be entered into “circulation” for new business ventures.<sup>11</sup> While we have witnessed cases of this type of transition over the past ten years for tourist redevelopment, this model is receiving renewed energy as a new policy for “rural industrialization” gains speed in Sichuan. For rural industrialization, the objective is further commodification of land itself for new agribusiness ventures; new reforms in land policy seek to liberalize the terms under which land can enter into “circulation”. Farmers receive compensation or even a new job as their cropland is made available to new industrialized agricultural or tourism enterprises; at the same time they are given a loan which they need to pay off in order to own their new apartment. The advantage of these innovations is that they bring higher levels of capital into the countryside for the purpose of growing the economy. While some rural people welcome these developments, for those who resist commodification, the pressures are more problematic. From an urban perspective, this “land complex” poses intractable contradictions with the principle of voluntary participation. As one newspaper article describes the problem:

Targeting some farmers' unwillingness to take out their land for collective economic development, the principle of voluntariness has been adopted and farmers have been given time to feel the tangible benefit of the overall development program. In the process, changing farmers' inborn land complex and comparatively backward mindset poses the largest challenge to local authorities. Most of Chengdu's local governments have taken into full consideration farmers' actual interests. They have also made great efforts to strengthen their awareness of democratic management and participation to make them really feel about their role in developing and managing local economy. Agricultural industrialization is the only way out for further agricultural development. To realize the goal needs

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<sup>11</sup> A variant of this is being implemented on a vast scale to the west--52,000 Tibetan herders and farmers into permanent housing this year - a practice rights groups say has been marked by abuses. (January 17, 08 article at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/01/17/2141101.htm>)

joint efforts from parties concerned. These include government guidance, optimal allotment of production factors, regulation of social organizations and active participation from farmers.<sup>12</sup>

Here the need for official “guidance” and a presumed ability to create enlightened readings of farmer’s interests run the risk of conflict with the principle of farmer’s voluntary and active participation. While the adherence to voluntary participation is commendable, when farmers are unwilling to give up their land, that view continues to be essentialized and thus de-legitimized as reflecting an “inborn land complex” and a “backward mindset”.<sup>13</sup>

In Ya’an the first instance of resettlement for economic redevelopment, for the establishment of a Nature Park in 2000, was bungled by the Township and County governments. Initial efforts to develop the park locally were abandoned in favor of the higher capital investments possible from selling the development rights to a company from Chongqing. As part of the new arrangement, the government took the villagers’ land, gave them one-time compensation, and moved them into old housing in a bankrupt factory compound located closer to the county seat. After protests broke out, the villagers were permitted to build new free-standing houses on land adjacent to the road approach to the park. As part of the new compensation, some took jobs in the park and others were given the opportunity to run souvenir and snack stands. Local reactions to the resettlement were mixed—while some villagers were better off, others felt less secure being dependent on the fickle popularity of the park as a tourist destination—but most people said that the government had badly mishandled the situation.<sup>14</sup>

The next resettlement in the area, in 2007 – 08, was to make way for another township-brokered corporate redevelopment project of ecotourism, the reconstruction of the “ancient town” of Shangli.<sup>15</sup> While the issue of compensation was still contentious, this time the township government built a “new district” destination for resettled residents, located on crop land near the old community but out of sight. The new district planning followed the common pattern that moves people out of single family homes into

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<sup>12</sup> “New roadmap for rural economic development” By Mao Zheshan  
2008-10-10 07:43 China Daily

<sup>13</sup> For more detail on this essentializing discourse see Flower, John “Peasant Consciousness” in Leonard and Kaneff (eds) *Post-Socialist Peasant?: Rural and Urban Constructions of Identity in Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Former Soviet Union.* , Palgrave Macmillan London 2002. A very interesting perspective on what might more legitimately constitute the “land complex” can be found in Andrew Fischer's 2006 paper published by the Development Studies Institute of the London School of Economics entitled, “Subsistence Capacity: The commodification of rural labour re- examined through the case of Tibet”

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed account of this case see Flower and Leonard, "Bifengxia Nature Park: the Ownership of Landscape in Post-Reform China" in *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers* , 41. 2002.

<sup>15</sup> This story is given in greater detail in “Ancient Town: Historical memory and the re-enchantment of place in Western Sichuan” presented at the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in 2008

townhouse developments, with a one-time payment to compensate any loss of land, and variable compensation for houses based on size and quality, generally assessed by building material according to a publicized standard. Families then purchase a townhouse using the compensation payment, sometimes aided with a more extended subsidy for the economic transition, or taking on new debt to make up the difference, if necessary. The new townhouses have three stories and are arranged along streets laid out in a grid pattern. Each has a compact kitchen (with electric wok and rice cooker), a bathroom, a living room, three bedrooms, and a shuttered ground floor for parking a minibus or motorcycles or for opening a shop or small business. These new domestic spaces sometimes result in disorientations; for example, when we visited one new house it appeared empty until we discovered the family huddled around an open fire in the corner of a storage room on the roof that they had converted into a makeshift *tangwu* ancestral hall, with a few pieces of smoked meat hanging on the eaves above the fire. They explained that it was cold and this was the only place to have an open fire, which they needed in order to smoke the meat. They had hung the standard inscription found in every *tangwu* in this most remote room in the house simply because it would not fit anywhere else in the floor plan that had space for individuals and guests but not for ancestors. Without a *tangwu*, proper kitchen hearth, pigpen, courtyard, or *maofang* nightsoil pit, the new house is not designed for agriculture but rather for a consumer-oriented wage labor economy, and the ground-floor storefront serves as “neo-liberal space” in the state imagining of a new entrepreneurial mentality.

The new district townhouses in Shangli display common design elements that isolate and emphasize stereotypical ornaments of local *wafang* architecture: carved wooden eave pendants (*chuandou*) and black tile roof details over balconies. The uniform traditionalistic ornamentation harmonizes the new district with the new/old town redevelopment, highlighting the translocality of the settlement house—at once a national project (the developer is from Zhejiang Province) and an essentialized “local flavor.” The harmonizing is not simply aesthetic, but an ironic gesture of sensitivity to local identity, now made a commodity in a state-brokered civilizing process that serves outside colonizing interests.<sup>16</sup>

In these cases of resettlement for economic redevelopment, communities moved intact; residents were relocated rather than dislocated. But in larger-scale dam resettlements in Ya’an, communities were divided, and the varying quality of resettlements speaks to the varying quality of the political relationships that underlie them. In the Tibetan autonomous township of Yaoji, two new towns, divided by a reservoir, were built to replace the one old town submerged by a large hydropower dam. One of the new towns was developed according to the same kind of common “local flavor” design plan,

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of authenticity see Notar, Beth E. “Authenticity Anxiety and Counterfeit Confidence: Outsourcing Souvenirs, Changing Money, and Narrating Value in Reform-Era China.” *Modern China* 32, no.1 (Jan 2006): 64-98. Oakes looks at the implicit contradictions in the politics of scaled identities in [China’s provincial identities: reviving regionalism and reinventing “Chineseness.”](#) *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59:3 (2000), 667-92.

featuring commoditized Tibetan ornamentation on large guesthouses built for the tourist economy. The Township government building is located at the height of this new town, and a government-run hotel stands at the entrance. The other new town across the reservoir is much plainer in appearance, the land is steeper and the streets narrower, and it had more problems and dissatisfaction associated with it. The town's resettlement divided the community along lines drawn by wealth and political or corporate connections.

In the biggest resettlement in Ya'an, over 100,000 people were moved to make way for the Pubugou dam in Hanyuan County.<sup>17</sup> Many of the affected communities were split up in the move; according to those displaced, this was a deliberate government policy to minimize resistance, especially after the large protests against the dam and resettlement—including the embezzlement of resettlement funds—in 2004. Hanyuan people were resettled to places scattered across Ya'an Municipality and other more distant parts of Sichuan Province. Two of the new districts are located along the same road leading to the Shangli tourist town redevelopment, but in contrast to that resettlement project for local people, the new houses for Hanyuan resettlers are much poorer in quality, with cracks in the walls and broken pipes within the first year. As outsiders they had no connection to the building process. Moreover, the Hanyuan resettlers complained that the houses were not designed for agriculture (lacking the kitchen, courtyard, pig pen, and maofang) and land they were assigned (divided from existing village holdings) was much less fertile and the climate wetter and colder than their former homes. Back in Hanyuan these people made a good living as farmers, but the move took away that livelihood and puts them in a position where they need to find wage labor, which they are not accustomed to doing. In what seems to be an attempt to harmonize the discord in these new districts, the local government raised a billboard with a picture of Hanyuan County and a slogan promoting the products from that agriculturally rich county, invoking nostalgia for the “home place” (*jia yuan*). The billboard echoes the VCDs produced for resettlers that contain a slideshow of images of the *jia yuan* set to a melodramatic score. Again, as in other resettlements, state planning in the new districts links local identity with national purpose—the sacrifice for a major infrastructure project—but here that local identity is romanticized, commodified and also stripped of agency. With communities broken up “*jia yuan*” replaces a real social connection with a sentimental attachment and “sense of place” (*difang gan*) safely recasts the local as an unthreatening ornament of a national imagining.

Perhaps because of the huge scale of dam construction under Western Development and the huge amounts of money involved, resettlement for dams has a history of corruption, protest, disempowerment, and dispossession<sup>18</sup>. Government officials are

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<sup>17</sup> See Flower, John Ecological Engineering on the Sichuan Frontier in *Social Anthropology* 2009 17:1 (40-55)

<sup>18</sup> Flower, John Ecological engineering on the Sichuan frontier: Socialism as development policy, local practice, and contested ideology in *Social Anthropology* Volume 17, Number 1, February 2009, pp. 40-55(16). Fan Xiao report on Zipingpu resettlement: <http://www.internationalrivers.org/files/ZipingpuResettle.pdf>

charged with carrying out resettlement for “green” or civilizing reasons, but they are also motivated by the opportunity for graft and profit, giving rise to another locally recognized housing type: the “corruption house.” In dam resettlements local people were not consulted about where they would move or into what kind of houses they would move, and the new livelihoods people were promised often failed to materialize. These problems of corruption have shaped popular imaginings of state-managed resettlement more broadly, and deeply affected the massive reconstruction effort after the Sichuan Earthquake.

### **Earthquake Reconstruction and Rural Urbanization**

The 2008 earthquake was the catalyst for large scale rural urbanization across Western Sichuan, and an opportunity to reimagine the socialist new village on a massive scale. Since the money for rebuilding damaged houses was typically made contingent on relocation to new urbanized districts, we encountered many heated discussions among families resistant to these moves and local officials bent on this kind of redesign. In the immediate wake of the earthquake, many families refused to move into temporary shelters, fearing that this would leave them vulnerable to losing their land; they preferred to live in tents next to their ruined homes and to rebuild using their own resources despite the discouragement of officials. There are many people who feel that farming is a necessary safety net in their household economies. Because the house is integral to the farming enterprise, moving the home means losing that livelihood. Others feel they do not have a capable wage earner in their family (or enough wage earners) and so they dig in. State agents at different levels have incentive to move farmers into new districts, and translocal forces are joining in a variety of negotiations with local residents to rebuild communities in ways that reveal different visions of the future of the countryside.

While the topic of earthquake reconstruction is well beyond the scope of this paper (here note that there are studies in progress; e.g. Daniel Abramson) there are three trends emerging that speak to the description of the meaning of new houses we venture here, and particularly to the translocality inherent in the construction—material and imaginary—of new houses. The first trend is the trans-regional adoption of earthquake stricken communities by coastal provinces and cities, which casts reconstruction as the building of a new spatial order linking the wealthy progressive East with the poorer backward hinterland through Western Development. The second trend is urban investment (most often from Chengdu) in rural development through entrepreneurial joint-ventures in which farmers provide land and city people provide funding, typically for ecotourism. One method is to have a rural resident share his home site with an urban individual willing to fund the construction in exchange for use rights to some part of the resulting building. The government has initiated special exceptions from former rules where building sites could only be traded within the village. In this new scenario, an urban dweller builds a large home on the site which can accommodate both the former resident and the investor. Even before the earthquake, this kind of urban-rural partnership was increasingly common in redevelopment projects and widely reported in the press as evidence of “opening” (*kaifang*) the thinking of rural people as a concomitant goal of resource “exploitation” (*kaifa*). In the “ancient town” redevelopment,

for example, a young Chengdu entrepreneur partnered with a local resident to build a large loufang guesthouse adjacent to the preserved old home of the local family. The partnership seemed to be working, but the city man imagined an exaggerated rusticity, literally covering the new brick and concrete house with tree bark, while his local partner focused on the new modern-style conveniences --such as flush toilets—they had installed.

The third trend is “ecological rural reconstruction” (*shengtai nongcun jianshe*) through building “low carbon communities” (*ditan minju*). This particular imagining of the socialist new village is being implemented at a number of sites in Guanxian and Pengzhou, including one experiment championed by the environmentalist policy entrepreneur and founder of Global Village Beijing, Sherry Liao (Liao Xiaoyi). Liao started an earthquake reconstruction project in Daping Village, Pengzhou Municipality, in July 2008, called “happiness and harmony [Lehe] homes” (*lehe jiayuan*) that promotes green building using local materials and new technologies. The “Lehe home” is an “environmental wooden house” (*huanbao muwu*), comprised of a post-and-beam structure filled-in with bamboo plywood and polystyrene board, that is consciously modeled on the old *wafang* with traditional ornamentation. Funding for reconstruction is an equal partnership, with Lehe, the local government, and each village family chipping in one third of the home cost (roughly 60,000 yuan total). The Lehe plan articulates with state “socialist new village” and rural urbanization objectives in three ways: First, the new Lehe houses are local resettlements that group the new homes in higher density; so low carbon communities are new districts with services (including water treatment), and they serve to reform the way farmers work the land. Second, Lehe reconstruction aims at developing the “green commodity economy” by training local people to make green-colored “traditional” handkerchiefs for sale to urban tourists, and by facilitating community supported agriculture to market local organic produce to specific communities in Chengdu, which both articulate with the state goal of breaking peasant backwardness with “market mentality.” Finally, Lehe shares the state’s nostalgic national imaginary in which local identity is essentialized, commodified and consumed in a new translocal spatial relation with city dwellers longing for the authentic, primitive, pristine, natural and green. In a newspaper article Sherry Liao comments on the purpose of the Lehe home project:

"The harmony of mind and body, individual and group, human being and the environment is very important," Liao said. "I hope the [Lehe] home will not only benefit the earthquake-stricken areas and the villagers, but also provide a natural and spiritual home for people who want to return to innocence."

The Lehe experiment has received wide press attention as a possible new path for the holistic development of the countryside in Sichuan and beyond. The group presents the “Lehe model” new house as “building the spiritual home [*jingshen jiayuan*] through the material home” where house construction is the center point in a broad reimagining of the “six realms of community, livelihoods, ‘restored spirit’ [ethics], governance, healthcare, and environment” designed to create the “five selves”: “self-strengthening the collective, individual autonomy [self-reliance], preservation of nature, moral self-

discipline, and rural self-esteem.” One reading of the project is that it is simply a direct translation of western trends in environment and development discourse, but the moral vision underpinning the Lehe model has distinctly Chinese characteristics, in particular the revival of the centuries old ideal of “village compacts” (*xiang yue*) to promote frugality, good environmental management, and self-governance under the paternal guidance of the party-state. Another reading is that the project’s prescriptions precisely diagnose the problems of resettlement—the breaking up of communities, the loss of agricultural livelihoods, the lack of public spirit and rampant corruption (community construction thus “includes collective management of social subsidy funds” ). But the project’s overall framing of “ecological civilization” (*shengtai wenming*) suggests that, to some degree, it is an urban imagining of a rural other that projects a civilizing national “home” onto a translocal house.

## Conclusion

Zhang and Ong ‘s work<sup>19</sup> on privatization in China examines “the new social” that has resulted from the mixing of what they call “socialism from afar” with “neo-liberal freedoms”. While this theoretical framework provides a much-needed flexibility to describe the complex mixture of market incentives and embedded orders that define China today, the case of new houses in rural Sichuan cautions us against seeing either the economic commands of central planning as too distant or the economies of individual families as too free. In our area of fieldwork at any rate, new house construction is largely driven by state policies, whether through outright resettlement or through the boost in incomes from Western Development, and all signs point to an acceleration of state re-engineering of the countryside through enclosure and incentive.

Working from the assumption that farming is backward and obsolete, government policy explicitly aims at civilizing rural China into an urban consumer structure. Zhang Chuanwen recently wrote in the China Daily,

An autarkical small-peasant economy of more than 2,000 years in China has proven that it is impossible for rural households to become rich mainly through agriculture. To resolve this issue, we must think beyond rural areas. When peasants settle down in cities and become urbanized, the issue can be finally resolved.”<sup>20</sup>

The place of coercion in this process needs to be more fully debated. Andrew Fischer’s reworking of Polanyi and Lewis to explore the meanings of “subsistence capacity” is particularly relevant to understanding the dynamics of transition from a primarily farming

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(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

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economy to increasing levels of wage employment.<sup>21</sup> Fischer examines why Tibetans have effectively retained a resistance to low-wage earning opportunities in the face of falling real incomes. He reflects on Polanyi's assertion that coercion is necessary in transitioning populations from farming to wage income and examines the role of cultural factors in conditioning such responses. In contrast to assertions that China is undergoing a "spontaneous" release of entrepreneurial energy, our evidence suggests that a turn to wage employment in our area of research has been driven by a host of central policies that have both given impetus to the transition and even mandated it.

The motivations for rural redevelopment in Sichuan frequently lie in benefits accrued outside of the areas being redeveloped. In the case of Xiakou, redevelopment occurred as a by-product of the need for agroforestry to protect downstream ecology. It has so far succeeded because it has been met by ample new opportunities for off-farm income. Still, because these new incomes derive largely from government subsidized infrastructure development, sustainability remains an open question. In Shangli and Bifeng, redevelopment was driven by the possibilities for profits in the tourist industry, a goal, like rural industrialization, that is more likely to have some local benefits but those benefits are highly variable given the vagaries of the economy and its distributive politics. In the cases of dam building in Hanyuan and Yaoji, the redesign of rural life was motivated by the need for electrical power for industrial development in the East, and here the losses seem heaviest. Most recently, central state policy has formulated rural redevelopment in terms of the urgent need to make rural people into consumers to take the place of faltering consumerism in the global economy.

In line with this new objective of manufacturing consumers, the state is promoting the extension of credit and the deepening of subsidies as an engine of this transformation. The recently issued No 1 document explicitly advocates the method of expanding credit to further achieve this goal. As explained in another recent news report:

Hefty subsidies played a big part in invigorating purchases of home appliances and cars in rural areas. And authorities are now thinking of extending this to sales of construction materials. Apart from lifting domestic consumption, they believe building new homes is all part of building a new countryside. The central government's No. 1 document said that the government will support house construction in rural areas as an important measure to stimulate domestic consumption. [...] Economists have pointed out that one of China's fundamental economic challenges is to drive domestic demand. And there is huge potential in stimulating the domestic demand of rural areas.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Fischer, Andrew (2006) paper published by the Development Studies Institute of the London School of Economics entitled, "Subsistence Capacity: The commodification of rural labour re-examined through the case of Tibet"

<sup>22</sup> [China to boost rural construction 2010-02-02 09:58 BJT  
<http://english.cctv.com/program/bizchina/20100202/101684.shtml> Special Report: No.1 Document Targets Rural-Urban Development ]

How will this increase in rural credit affect the redevelopment of rural Sichuan? As we have suggested, debt comes in many forms--it can be part of primarily local exchanges of reciprocity and patronage, it can be an intended or unintended outcome of a resettlement package, and increasingly, it will be the direct result of new government policies to stimulate rural consumption, but all these forms may come into play with the new policy. We have described how social pressures in the village, begun with the policy of letting some get rich first, and extended with the increasing prevalence of migrant wage remittances, have encouraged independent house construction to aim for ever larger new houses. Many villagers are motivated to borrow in order to keep pace with their neighbors whether they can afford it or not. If agriculture is designed out of new houses and new districts, higher levels of market consumption will further cement the inhabitants' connection to new economic forms, and rural credit will intensify the process. In the independent house, we noted that loans through old networks of *renqing* exchange have increased with pressures to rebuild larger houses, and that this inflation of expectations can have a corrosive effect on those networks. Debt may also be increasingly built into resettlement schemes, where the new house costs more than the one-time compensation for the older house being replaced. Sudden spurts of inflation (as occurred in 2008) or urgent healthcare needs<sup>23</sup> can worsen this gap since old houses are frequently torn down before new houses are fully finished. All these trends are more likely to increase pressure on rural people to earn incomes and move to a more commodified economic form.

The process of rural redevelopment has been far from uniform. We have attempted a preliminary exploration of a potential range of experiences by following their expression in the reconstruction of rural housing. The changes range from the more organic processes of in-place development (socialism from afar) to the radical displacements of forced relocation (mandated transition). We have argued that the house is not only a reflection of cultural change in this period of reorganization, but also an engine of change. Where state agents or policy entrepreneur intermediaries are involved in house construction, the new houses rarely include infrastructure for agriculture, and their architecture may even preclude its practice. Local aspirations for modernity and its social formations are also changing and local people are building houses that create new kinds of interior spaces, an expression of reformulated networks and social competition.

All the various forms of new house are fundamentally translocal in design, financing, and construction, and thus as imaginings of a new countryside. The independent house is an imagining of local aspirations to embrace outside networks and opportunities in place. Resettlement houses are either neo-liberal schemes that re-imagine a socialist new village of modern entrepreneurs and consumers, or a vision of urban-rural partnership building ecological civilization. All these imaginings of a new *jiayuan* homeplace mix national goals and local aspirations, and all struggle with the challenge

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<sup>23</sup> An example of this is related in "Sichuan Quake Victims Move into New Homes" 2010-02-19 12:57:21 CRIENGLISH.com <http://english.cri.cn/7146/2010/02/19/1461s551117.htm>

of developing sustainable livelihoods. In that ongoing struggle each change in house structure is a foreclosure on the past and the opening of a new expectation.