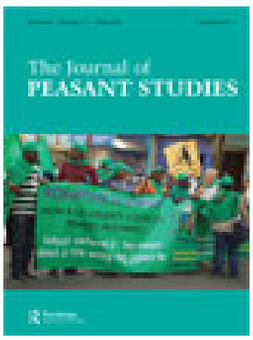

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Peasant protests over land seizures in rural China

Chih-Jou Jay Chen

ABSTRACT
This article reports key findings drawing on a database containing more than 12,000 protest news events in China from 2000 to 2018, including over 1500 protests against land expropriation. It finds that while social conflicts over land seizures continue to be the leading cause of protests in rural China, there was an upward trend for the number of related protest between 2000 and 2014 and a downward trend between 2014 and 2018. Under Xi Jinping, police were increasingly inclined to arrest and crack down on land seizure protesters. Failing to adequately deal with land disputes may undermine China's regime legitimacy.

KEYWORDS
Land disputes; land expropriation; repression; news events data; China

Introduction

Since the 1990s, land has emerged as a prominent instrument of economic development in India and China. Despite the diverse nature of the two political regimes, both China and India have witnessed an increase in land dispossession; land acquisition by state and private actors has become highly contentious in both countries (Ren 2017; Ong 2020). Central to the Chinese development model is the pursuit of land development, which is principally realized through rural-to-urban land conversion (Le Mons Walker 2006; Lin 2009; Hsing 2010; Andreas and Zhan 2016). Unlike economies where landowners have full property rights, in China rural land is legally owned by the village collective, and urban land is owned by the state. Rural collective land is contracted to peasant households, and rural land conversion for development use can only happen via state requisition. This incentivizes local governments to expropriate rural land at modest, fixed prices and develop it at a profit, which is a major source of revenue to finance government expenditures. The government's expropriation of rural land for industrial and commercial development, urban expansion, public construction, etc. has been expanding accordingly. As a result, grievances and disputes over land expropriation have been escalating; collective resistance and conflicts between officials and peasants have also become more frequent and severe (O'Brien and Li 2006; Van Rooij 2007; Cai 2010; Sargeson 2012; Sargeson 2013; Song, Wang, and Lei 2016; Zhou and Ai 2016).[1] The conflicts over land seizures highlight the fate of China's disenfranchized peasants – who carve out their existence at the lower margins of society, and whose rights and interests are regularly

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[1]'Land expropriation' in China in this article refers to 'rural land expropriation.' As noted, urban land in China is owned by the state, and by definition there is no 'urban land expropriation.'

infringed upon and whose sense of injustice remains very strong (O'Brien and Li 2006; So 2007; Sargeson 2013; Chuang 2014; Ren 2017).

Peasant protests over land expropriation in China first began to take shape in the early 2000s, and became widespread and more significant in the mid-2000s. A survey conducted in 2011 interviewing 1791 Chinese farming households across 17 provinces reported that the number of 'land takings' or compulsory state acquisitions had multiplied since 2005; 43% of the villages surveyed had been subjected to such land takings over the past decade. The survey reported that 18% of land seizure cases involved forceful evictions (Landesa 2012).

In the face of land expropriation conflicts between officials and citizens, the central government has over the past two decades passed laws and regulations in order to protect the rights and interests of peasants as well as to curb abuses of power by local officials. Yet, their efforts have yet to achieve significant success. In 1998, China revised the Land Management Act, superficially raising the compensation standards for land expropriation. However, concerning other more critical aspects, such as the scope of land expropriation, relevant procedures, dispute resolution mechanisms, and the forced nature of land expropriation, the revised law has been even less conducive to protecting the collective interests of the villagers.

In China, local governments often use the public interest as an excuse to implement land expropriation only to then sell off the land to meet local financial needs, making huge profits in the process. Simultaneously, this collusion between political and business factions allows local cadres to accumulate positive performance assessments needed for their promotion (Hsing 2010; Whiting 2011). Local authorities often encounter villagers' resistance against the state's land requisition. While they may try to silence the disgruntled by accommodating their demands, making concessions does not always resolve the underlying disputes. Rural activists may use central policy or directives to legitimize their 'rightful' resistance against local government's predatory behavior (O'Brien and Li 2006).

This article presents the trends and characteristics of collective protests against land expropriation in rural China. It shows that although the central government has tried to regulate local governments' actions and reduce land expropriation conflicts through laws and regulations, the incentives for local governments to use land expropriation to meet financial needs and boost the interests of officials are still hard to resist. The scope and extent of rural land expropriation-related protests had continued to increase and intensify from the early 2000s until 2014. While the number of popular protests has been in decline since 2015, the fundamental causes of land expropriation conflicts still remain. The continued hierarchical management of the land supply becomes even more critical as the government seeks to manage a massive urbanization process while simultaneously maintaining political stability. Research indicates that the Chinese central government has no intention to alter the basic characteristics of China's land and fiscal institutions based on hierarchical land management and urban/rural dualism (Fang and Pal 2016; Brandt et al. 2017; Rithmire 2017). As such, the nature and intensity of China's land disputes and conflicts have already changed the country's state-society relations, and may seriously undermine regime legitimacy.

Data

There remains a dearth of systematic information on social protests in China. This study draws on data from the author's collection of more than 12,000 protest events that occurred in China from 2000 to 2018, among which 2910 cases were protests that occurred in rural areas and 1517 cases that were land expropriation related protests. These cases were collected from five online sources, including newspaper databases, six of which are located outside of mainland China.[2]

A protest event was required to meet the following four criteria in order to be included in the database: (1) it involved more than ten participants; (2) it presented either a grievance against some target or a demand made to some institution; (3) it manifested in a confrontational form; and (4) it was located in the public sphere. Based on these criteria, non-confrontational events, such as complaints, letter writing campaigns, lawsuits, and press conferences, were excluded. Petitioning (*shangfang*) events are included only if they escalated into public protests (e.g. holding demonstrations or sit-ins in front of government offices); legal and routine petitioning activities are not included in the dataset.

Assessing whether the cases included in the dataset are representative of the overall protest landscape in China is difficult, but this dataset includes the largest number of publicly accessible news reports over the past two decades. Still, relying on media reports may introduce bias into the data (Earl et al. 2004). The protest cases contained in this article are certainly a small subset of the actual numbers because many protests are not reported in the press. In contemporary China, the fluctuation in the number of news reports on protests over the years may be caused by the business operations of the news media or the degree of censorship. Hence, the number of reported protests may not accurately reflect the actual number of protests that have occurred. Also, protests by some groups (e.g. urban workers) may be more likely to gain media attention than others (e.g. peasants in remote areas). Small-scale protests are also less likely to be reported than large-scale ones. Therefore, some groups, such as small-scale protests, may be underrepresented in this study's sample.

To maintain data reliability, the data sources in this study were kept the same, and cases were systematically drawn from the same newspaper databases and news agencies. Protest news solely from Internet or social media sources were not included to avoid potential biases. As large-scale protests are less likely to be covered up, they can be suggestive of the nature and trend of social protests in China. A recent study on protest events in China drawing data from social and news media also finds that reporting bias in the news media is substantially reduced for large events (Goebel and Steinhardt 2019).

Furthermore, considering the political sensitivity of protest news in China, there may exist description bias of the news events data. The news stories published in Chinese newspapers tend to present a government perspective, while some of those outside China may present the government in the worst possible light. For example, while

[2]The cases were collected from a news database, Wisers (http://wisenews.wisers.net/wisenews), and three online news agencies. Wisers' news database provides full-text content from nine news agencies or newspapers published in China and two newspapers in Hong Kong, including Zhongguo Xinwenshe [China News Service], Xinjingbao [The Beijing News], Nanfang Ribao [Nanfang Daily], Nanfang Zhoumo [Southern Weekly], Nanfang Dushibao [Southern Metropolis Daily], Huaxi dushibao [West China Metropolis Daily], Guangzhou Ribao [Guangzhou Daily], Shenzhen Wanbao [Shenzhen Evening News], Lanzhou Chenbao [Lanzhou Morning News], Pingguo Ribao [Apple Daily] and Mingbao [Ming Pao]. The three online news agencies include Radio Free Asia, Boxun [Boxun] and Dajiyuan [The Epoch Times].

protest activists might seek to attract media attention to expose government officials' corruption and wrongdoing, news reports might frame the coverage in ways that underscore the disruption and violence of the protest. These possibilities certainly exist, but they do not necessarily invalidate the analysis because key variables included in this study are mostly objective information about protest characteristics, such as date, location, protest groups, the number of participants, the type of demands, the protest target and tactics, and the government's response. While data from reported protest events cannot be relied on for a description of the whole country along any single dimension, this unrepresentativeness does not necessarily affect the generalizability of findings regarding the relationships between variables (cf. Manion 1994). Existing research on contentious politics in China is generally based on case studies or small samples. This study examines the characteristics and trends of peasant protests with a large sample. In this way, it can serve as a starting point for further systematic research.

Development of land-seizure protests in rural China

This section first presents the development and expansion of popular protests in China. From the news events data of the past 19 years, it can be ascertained that collective resistance to land seizures has rapidly increased with regard to the number of events, spatial expansion, and regional distribution.

Table 1 and Figure 1 show the frequency distribution of protest events from 2000 to 2018, including protests that occurred in urban and rural areas, as well as peasant protests over land seizures. By and large, during the period of 2004–2005, an initial rise in the frequency of collective protests in China can be observed. In 2007, protest frequencies reached their first peaks, continuing their climb in 2009 only to regress around 2011–2012. The annual number and increasing rates of protests in urban cities were far greater than those in rural areas. Nevertheless, different protest categories – including peasant protests against land seizures – all reveal similar trends, with their frequencies reaching a peak in 2014 before slowly declining and then dropping significantly in 2017–2018.

The fourth column of Table 1 reports the annual percentage of rural protests that were caused by land seizure issues. On average, land seizure protests accounted for 52% of rural collective protests. However, in the peak period of rural resistance from 2013 to 2016, the proportion of land seizure protests reached about 60%, a much higher figure than in the past. The last column of Table 1 shows the national land acquisition area during the 2004–2017 period. During this period, the largest area of land acquisition (i.e. 1800 km^2 per year) was seized between 2011 and 2013. It is worth noting that the timeframe with the most instances of collective resistance against land grabs was the 2013–2015 period. This indicates a correlation between an increase in land acquisition and a subsequent rise in collective resistance to land taking.

Were instances of Chinese peasants' collective resistance against land expropriation concentrated in specific areas? Were the cases concentrated towards the coast or the inland regions? Or were land expropriation protests related to a region's economic development? According to this study's data, the number of land-seizure protests has not only increased over the past ten years, but protests have also spread to other locations, and were not limited to specific regions. Table 2 shows the number of distinct locations of land-seizure protests since 2000, clearly illustrating the protests' degree of diffusion. As

Table 1. Number of protest news events, 2000–2018.

Year	(1) No. of Urban Protest	(2) No. of Rural Protest	(3) No. of Land-Seizure Protest	(3) / (2) %	Land Acquisition Area (10,000 square km)
2000	44	12	5	42	
2001	96	18	4	22	
2002	95	31	7	23	
2003	108	25	4	16	
2004	133	44	20	45	1613
2005	192	45	21	47	1264
2006	209	92	48	52	1396
2007	372	133	75	56	1216
2008	475	97	46	47	1345
2009	586	134	69	51	1505
2010	610	181	86	48	1642
2011	518	150	79	53	1842
2012	636	137	60	44	2161
2013	994	335	196	59	1832
2014	1709	549	311	57	1476
2015	1328	471	286	61	1549
2016	678	263	148	56	1714
2017	532	123	31	25	1934
2018	382	70	21	30	2004
Total	9697	2910	1517	52	

Sources: Author's collection; Data of land acquisition area were drawn from National Bureau of Statistics; http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01&zb=A0B02&sj=2016 (accessed 31 December 2019).

can be seen from Table 2, there were land expropriation-related protests in a new prefecture-level city nearly every year from 2000 to 2018 (with the exceptions of 2004 and 2018). Land expropriation protests thus were not limited to a few specific cities, and were diffusing further each year. Of China's 333 prefecture-level cities in 2018, 253 (76%) had witnessed at least one collective protest against land requisition by peasants over the 2000–2018 period. This proliferation trend changed in 2017. Since then, most instances of collective resistance to land seizures have occurred in counties and cities that had already experienced similar protests in the past.

Table 3 illustrates the regional distribution of the locations where collective land expropriation-related protests have occurred, showing that such incidents happened in all regions of the country. In terms of changes in each region, most of the collective protests against land requisition between 2003 and 2007 transpired in the Pearl River Delta Region of Guangdong, accounting for 32% of all land-seizure protests. After 2008, the number of land expropriation-related protests in this region decreased. Instead, it was the inland regions that accounted for the largest proportion, accounting for 38% in 2008–2012, and 45% in 2013–2018 of all land-seizure protests respectively.

The distribution trend of these land protests corresponded with China's economic development and urbanization progress during the past two decades. From 2000 to 2007, the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong was China's fastest industrializing and urbanizing region. In this area, local governments were highly motivated to develop industrial zones and thus expand the scope of land expropriation, causing significant protests as a result. However, during the ten years from 2008 to 2018, the interior provinces began to develop and urbanize, which subsequently led to an increase in land expropriation-related conflicts.

Table 4 systematically lists the cities with the largest number of peasant collective protest incidents against land grabs. Regardless of protest scale, leading the list of cities are

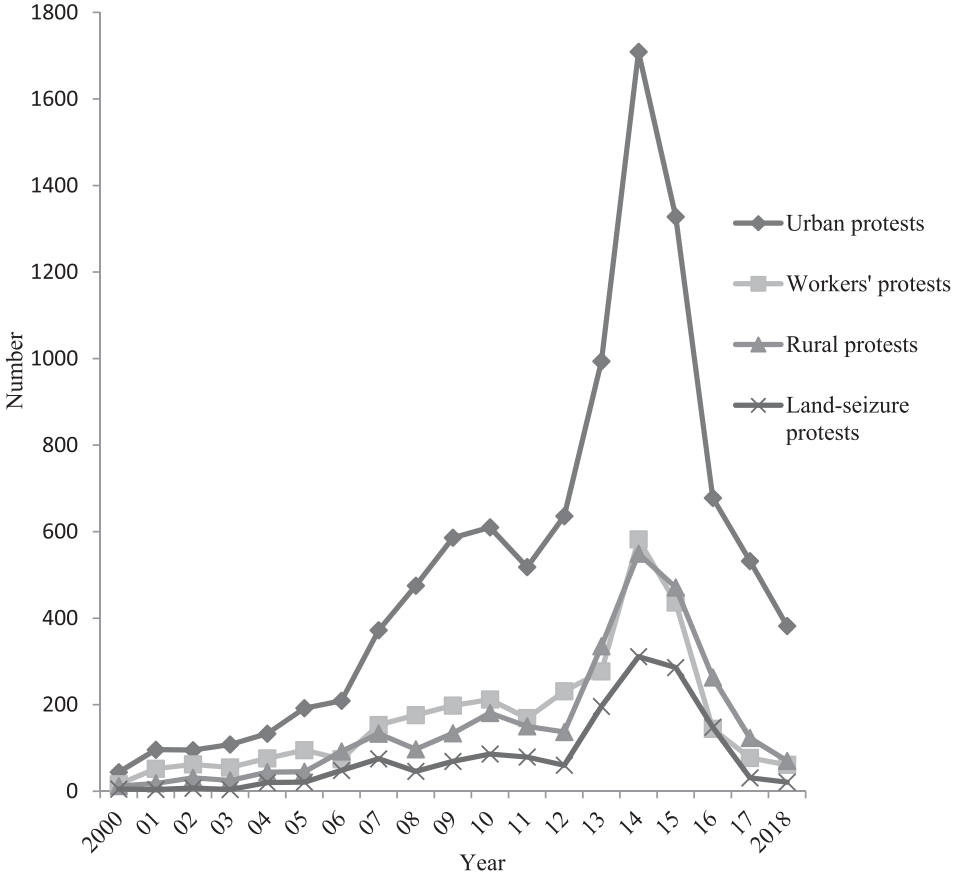

Figure 1. Number of protest events in China, 2000–2018. Source: Author's collection.

Table 2. Number of distinct locations of land-seizure protest in rural China.

Year	All locations	New locations	Old locations	Old / All (%)
2000	5	5	0	0
2001	4	3	1	25
2002	6	5	1	17
2003	4	2	2	50
2004	14	10	4	100
2005	16	12	4	13
2006	25	14	11	36
2007	29	10	19	66
2008	31	14	17	48
2009	45	22	23	49
2010	59	23	36	58
2011	50	17	33	66
2012	38	7	31	82
2013	88	22	66	75
2014	144	46	98	67
2015	131	27	104	79
2016	91	12	79	87
2017	20	2	18	90
2018	14	0	14	100
Total	814	253	561	

Source: Author's collection.

Table 3. Locations of land-seizure protest events in China, 2000–18.

	2000–18		00–02	03–07	08–12	13–18
	N	%	%	%	%	%
		100	100	100	100	100
Pearl River Delta Region	218	14	19	32	17	10
Yangtze River Delta	127	8	6	10	11	7
Bohai Economic Rim	126	8	13	13	9	7
Other Coastal Regions	418	28	13	18	24	30
Other Interior Regions	628	41	50	27	38	45
Total	1517		16	168	340	993

Source: Author's collection.

Table 4. Prefectures with most land-seizure protests, 2000–2018.

All protests			Medium scale protests (100–1000 participants)			Large scale (more than 1000 protesters)		
	1517	100		596	100		233	100
	N	%		*N*	%		*N*	%
Foshan	70	4.6	Foshan	29	4.9	Foshan	22	9.5
Chengdu	64	4.2	Chengdu	28	4.7	Shanwei	15	6.5
Guangzhou	37	2.4	Beijing	20	3.4	Guangzhou	12	5.2
Beijing	37	2.4	Xi'an	17	2.9	Chengdu	11	4.8
Xi'an	35	2.3	Dongguan	13	2.2	Shantou	9	3.9
Wenzhou	34	2.2	Wenzhou	12	2.0	Chaozhou	8	3.5
Shanwei	31	2.0	Guangzhou	12	2.0	Zhanjiang	6	2.6
Dongguan	27	1.8	Quanzhou	11	1.8	Dongguan	6	2.6
Fuzhou	25	1.6	Zhanjiang	11	1.8	Zhengzhou	5	2.2
Shanghai	24	1.6	Hangzhou	10	1.7	Jieyang	5	2.2

Source: Author's collection.

Guangdong's Foshan, Guangzhou, and Shanwei, as well as Chengdu in Sichuan. In other words, although land requisitions have occurred throughout the country, some cities are indeed affected more than others. More specifically, during the 2000–2018 period, there were 233 large-scale (more than 1000 participants) land seizure protests, of which the top five cities with the most incidents – Foshan, Shanwei, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Shantou – accounted for 69 protests (30%). Over the past twenty years, Guangdong's Pearl River Delta has been the region with the most intense land protests in China. In 2015, real estate investment in Guangdong reached 850 billion RMB, outperforming Jiangsu for the first time and taking the lead across the entire country (Guangdong Statistical Bureau 2016).

Causes of peasant protests over land seizures

Naturally, local governments' land requisition for development does not necessarily lead to peasant opposition and collective resistance. In China's rapidly urbanizing cities, land expropriation often becomes an economic opportunity for peasants, who are more interested in getting high compensation (and non-agricultural opportunities) rather than harvesting good crops with fewer profits in the industrializing economy. The more land that is developed, the more land lease revenue that is generated for the local government. This leads to more profit for developers and local governments, and then more opportunities for peasant compensation (Paik and Lee 2012; Cai 2016; Fang and Pal 2016; Heurlin 2016; Yep and Forrest 2016). For peasants, the key to expropriation is legal procedures,

Table 5. Large-scale land-seizure protest cases in 2016–18.

No.	Location	Date	News events
1	Dongguan Guangdong	1/4/2016	Villagers surrounded city government premises protesting officials' embezzling funds from land sales (Radio Free Asia 2016a).
2	Hechi Guangxi	1/11/2016	Minority peasants paralyzed traffic throughout the county seat against the government's cancelation of a minimum living standard guarantee (Radio Free Asia 2016b).
3	Bengbu Anhui	2/18/2016	Villagers blocked a national highway to force the government to release village representatives in a land-seizure dispute (Renminbao 2016).
4	Chengdu Sichuan	3/21/2016	Villagers protested against shrinking resettlement homes (Boxun News 2016).
5	Jinan Shandong	3/28/2016	Villagers assembled in front of the government to demand demolition compensation (The Epoch Times 2016a).
6	Zhengzhou Henan	5/10/2016	Thousands assembled to mourn a villager killed by police after resisting forced demolition and killing a village official (Xinjingbao 2016a, 2016b).
7	Zhengzhou Henan	10/5/2016	Villagers repelled forced demolition crews escalating conflict between police and protesters (The Epoch Times 2016b).
8	Baise Guangxi	5/1/2017	Farmers collectively complained their land was expropriated for mining purposes (Radio Free Asia 2017a).
9	Zhanjiang Guangdong	8/2/2017	Villagers were injured and arrested when protesting against 'solar power system' (Radio Free Asia 2017b).
10	Jiaxing Zhejiang	6/30/2018	Villagers protested over compensation fees angrily smashing town government offices (Liberty Times Net 2018).
11	Zhuhai Guangdong	9/14/2018	Villagers staged a three day sit-in at the town government protesting the illicit selling of farmland (The Epoch Times 2018).

Source: Author's collection.

transparency, and compensation (including compensatory payments, new housing, social welfare, etc.). Peasants' dissatisfaction and resistance to land requisitions are mostly due to unlawful procedures, peasants being unaware of the fact that their land is about to be expropriated, compensatory payments falling short of expectations, and compensations being not in accordance with prior agreements. This is why peasants refuse to accept expropriation and relocation, and obstruct the requisition process. For illustration, Table 5 reports 11 land seizure protest events with more than 1000 participants between 2016 and 2018. This section takes these 11 events as examples to illustrate the causes of these large-scale protests. Most rural land requisition was meant for urban development, and the local government acquired land to resell it to developers. However, there were also cases of land expropriation where the government sold seized land to enterprises, or for state construction projects.

Cadres privately sold off village land

One of the reasons for these large-scale protests is that cadres privately sold off land without informing the affected villagers. Specifically, among the eleven large-scale land seizure protests that occurred between 2016 and 2018, three cases in Guangdong province (Cases 1, 9, 11) and one in Guangxi province (Case 8) all resulted from cadres' privately selling land to corporations. For example, Case 1 in Table 5 occurring in 2016 saw more than 1000 villagers from Dajingtou Village in Dongguan, Guangdong gathering outside the local town hall to demand a response from the government. The villagers were displeased that officials and village cadres had not honored their promise to

hand the financial returns over to the villagers after they had jointly sold the village's collective land. Beginning in 2009, the Dajingtou Village Committee privately sold the village's collective land, with a total profit of 1.55 billion RMB. At that time, the village committee said that it would use the proceeds to pay off outstanding debt first, and then manage the remaining 400 million RMB on behalf of the villagers to pay for their social security and major issues regarding the people's livelihood (including housing subsidies of 50,000 RMB per villager). However, time passed and the village committee had not fulfilled its promises apart from paying for social security. After the new village chief had taken office, he said that only 70 million RMB remained of the money raised by the land sale. Therefore, the villagers suspected that the money had been embezzled by village cadres (Duowei News 2016; Feixinwen [Not-News] 2016a; Radio Free Asia 2016a).

Case 8 occurred on 1 May 2017, when about 2000 villagers in Gunian Village, Baise City, Guangxi Province jointly penned an online open letter and held a sit-in in the village. Because of its rich mineral resources, Gunian Village had attracted aluminum mining companies to launch mining operations. The local government ignored the rights and interests of the villagers, and deceived them twice by expropriating their land and embezzling the land requisition compensation. No matter how the villagers reported these incidents to the higher-level government or even petitioned, the local authorities would hire thugs employed by organized crime forces to block them. The villagers demanded that the relevant documents would only be signed after the price had been negotiated and the actual land requisition area had been measured. However, the local authorities continued to deceive their superiors and delude their subordinates, secretly seizing land regardless of the villagers' opposition (Feixinwen (Not-News) 2016e; Radio Free Asia 2017a).

Similarly, Case 11 in Table 5 saw a large number of villagers in Xiaotunchong Village, Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province surrounding the town government for three consecutive days since 14 September 2018. In the period from 2003 to 2004, the village committee, without the knowledge of most villagers, signed a land requisition contract with the town's Longshan Industrial Zone. Later the villagers were informed that the land would be leased for 50 years. However, the town government had not issued any official land requisition announcements, and there was no compensation. The villagers only received a small amount of money for their lost harvest, and were completely unaware that their leasing agreement had become a land requisition contract. The affected land area stretched over 3899 mu (38.99 ha). Until 2018, the town government had not been able to provide any relevant official documentation for the land requisition made in 2003–2004. Local government officials evidently sold the land without the villagers' knowledge, while also failing to provide any kind of compensation for the expropriation of land (New Tang Dynasty Television 2018; The Epoch Times 2018).

Case 9 in Table 5 occurred on 2 August 2017, when more than 10,000 villagers in Shuiyu Village, Jianghong Town, Zhanjiang City, Guangdong Province protested against the construction of a photovoltaic project. The villagers waved banners and paraded around the town hall to demand that the town government stop the construction projects. Between June and August 2017, Jianghong Town had borne witness to more than ten large- and small-scale demonstrations against photovoltaic projects, but the town government had refused to make concessions and resorted to the use of force to suppress protests, arousing even more public ire. Villagers claimed that town

government officials forged documents and purposely undervalued the land for developers. The villagers complained to the city government to no avail, leaving them with no choice but to take to the streets. The protesters believed that the radiation in the area would be at unhealthy levels after the completion of the photovoltaic project (Renminbao 2017; Radio Free Asia 2017b).

The above reported protest events triggered by cadres' private sale of the land implied that they would obtain a large profit for themselves, even pocketing the land compensation originally meant for the villagers. The villagers were neither informed about the land requisition beforehand, nor did they receive adequate compensation afterward.

Local governments breaking their promises of compensation

In some other cases, villagers knew about the land expropriation in advance and agreed to it. However, the fact that the local government did not honor its original promises of compensation prompted subsequent collective protests. For example, in Case 2 that occurred in January 2016, tens of thousands of landless peasants in Guangxi blocked the entire county seat and staged demonstrations to protest against the county government's cancelation of a minimum living standard guarantee that had been promised to them before their expropriation. For more than ten years, the county government had been seizing the land at a low price and then reselling it to developers at a high price. In order to successfully defraud the villagers' land, the county government officials promised them that the villagers whose land was expropriated would receive a minimum living allowance. Therefore, many villagers survived on the minimum living allowance after their land had been seized by the government. The villagers argued that the county government's discontinuation of the minimum living allowance had left them with no way out (Feixinwen [Not-News] 2016b; Radio Free Asia 2016b).

In Case 4, on 21 March 2016, thousands of villagers in Chengdu, Sichuan launched a demonstration and raised banners in front of the village committee. They protested that the resettlement homes they were awarded as compensation after the demolition of their old homes were significantly smaller than promised. The land of four villages was seized by the local government in 2010. It had been stipulated in the signing agreement that the size of the resettlement homes was to be 100 square meters, but the villagers discovered that the actual space had shrunk to a mere 83 square meters. At the same time, the local government had unconditionally rescinded the 8 square meters of shops that it had promised, and did not compensate for the road space it occupied at the time. Therefore, the villagers were furious about being deceived by the promises of the local government (Boxun News 2016).

Case 10 transpired in June 2018, when thousands of villagers in Zhejiang protested because they were dissatisfied with the huge discrepancies between the promised demolition compensation fees and the amounts actually remitted, as well as the sudden termination of subsidy payments. The city government originally agreed to provide yearly subsidies until 2028, but the government notified residents in 2018 that the payments would be suspended. Also, some villagers whose land had been expropriated received pensions that were lower than the state wage standards. On the other hand, holdouts (so-called 'nail households') had received much higher compensation payments for the demolition of their houses than what the other residents had previously received,

causing even stronger dissatisfaction amongst the villagers (Liberty Times Net 2018; Voice of America 2018).

Similarly, Case 5 occurring on 28 March 2016, saw more than a thousand villagers from Jinan City in Shandong gathering in front of the district government office to protest the government being in arrears with demolition compensations. The protest had begun as early as 2009, when the homes in seven villages were demolished for the construction of a high-speed railway station in Jinan. The monthly compensation for each person was only 200 RMB for rent and 500 RMB for living expenses. Beginning in March 2016, the district government stopped issuing the 500 RMB living allowance, thus triggering collective protests. The villagers had been promised 80 square meter space in their relocated houses, but the actual usable space turned out to be only 50 square meters, with the remaining area being a shared space. Due to the shortage of housing in the relocation projects, there are still more than 500 families who have yet to move into a resettlement home. The discontinuation of living allowance payments has made their quality of life considerably worse (Feixinwen (Not-News) 2016d; The Epoch Times 2016a).

The government's brutal force of demolition

Last but not least, the most critical fuse that ignited many large-scale protests is the local government's unwillingness to compromise and its inclination to forcibly demolish buildings without prior notice and without negotiation. Over the course of demolition, local cadres frequently arrest and injure defiant villagers, creating more animosity and collective resistance in the process. Of the 11 cases of large-scale resistance in the 2016–2018 period, at least 6 cases belonged to this category.

Case 6 reported an event occurring on 12 May 2016, in which villagers of Xuegang Village of Huiji District in Zhengzhou in Henan protested the police killing of villager Fan Huapei who had killed an official in an attempt to resist the forced demolition of his home. Thousands of local villagers went to the place where he had died to lay wreaths and make donations. Hundreds of riot police blocked the scene, demolished the mourning hall, and dispersed the villagers. It had been reported that Huiji District had carried out violent demolitions for many years in the name of urban village transformation. On 10 May 2016, Fan Huapei received a phone call from home saying that a demolition team was cutting off water and electricity. When he rushed home, he saw a bulldozer demolishing his house. He took out a knife and killed the driver. Later, he ran to the district government office and stabbed the deputy director to death. On his way back home, several policemen shot him. However, the media reports in the area deviated from the villagers' version of the incident. The media reported that Fan Huapei had been drunk and caused three deaths and one injury with a knife. The police shot and killed him after a warning shot had not been able to contain him. Many villagers said that the media reports were false and complete nonsense. The fact that so many people took part in Fan Huapei's memorial activities horrified the local government (Xinjingbao 2016a, 2016b; Radio Free Asia 2016c). Case 7 is another example; on 5 October 2016, police entered Zhanggou Village in Xinzheng City in Henan to demolish factories. In response, more than one thousand villagers launched demonstrations protesting against the demolitions. Then the local government called in hundreds of heavily-armed riot police to suppress them. Armed with riot shields and lined up in a row, the police shouted slogans and rushed toward the villagers,

knocking all of the men and women down. However, the police strategy sparked only more public outrage. Subsequently, bricks, stones, and wooden sticks started to fly, and there was a fierce clash between the two sides. After three hours, the police retreated and the scene laid in ruins (Oriental Daily 2016; The Epoch Times 2016b). Before the riot, Zhanggou Village was home to a myriad of both large and small coal mines. Due to overmining, the underground had been completely hollowed out. The villagers built factories over the mines and relied on the rent for income. At the time, the local government did not stop them, and the villagers even paid a management fee of 2 RMB per square meter to the government when a factory was built. Later on, the government carried out forced demolitions saying that the buildings had been constructed illegally. The government's heavy-handed approach to evictions thus had inspired an outpouring of protest from the villagers.

Scale, targets, disruptions, and government responses

Previous research has shown that protest group size is the most important indicator of the chance of protest success in China. The larger a collective protest, the more likely it is to be noticed by higher-level governments or be reported in the news. Accordingly, government officials come under more pressure and may be more likely to make concessions (Cai 2008, 2010). Table 6 shows the scale of land-seizure protests by number of protest participants. In the 1134 land-seizure protests that occurred between 2000 and 2018, three types of protest scales (with participant categories of less than 100, 100 to 1000, or more than 1000) accounted for 27%, 53%, and 20% of cases respectively. As small-scale protests are less likely to be reported in the media and may be underrepresented in this article's sample, their actual proportion could be much larger. In terms of large-scale protests (more than 1000 participants), their relative proportion climbed and reached 33% from 2003 to 2007 but declined to 16% from 2013 to 2018. Although large-scale land-seizure protests have decreased proportionally, their numbers have still been increasing in recent years. The large protest numbers in recent years have resulted from persistent grievances and the emergence of new ones. The adult population of an average Chinese rural village ranges from a few hundred people to over one thousand. Collective protests with over 1000 participants are generally either events that span across villages, or single-village events that mobilize all members of the local community. Both types of cases show that the issues animating collective struggles have led to broad resentment and discontent. When examining the 11 large-scale land requisition protests in the 2016–18 period displayed in Table 5, it can be observed that five cases constitute instances where a single village was highly-mobilized and six cases where several villages were mobilized.

Table 6. Size distributions of land-seizure protest events in rural China, 2000–2018.

	2000–18		00–02	03–07	08–12	13–18
	N	%	%	%	%	%
		100	100	100	100	100
Less than 100	307	27	7	21	27	29
100–1000	596	53	67	47	48	55
More than 1000	231	20	27	33	25	16
Total	1134		15	144	283	692

Source: Author's collection.

Table 7. Protest targets of land-seizure protest events in rural China, 2000–2018.

	2000–18		00–02	03–07	08–12	13–18
	N	%	%	%	%	%
		100	100	100	100	100
Township/village government	784	52	44	56	60	49
Prefecture/city government	539	36	25	30	28	40
Central and Provincial government	24	2	13	5	0	1
State Firms	77	5	6	4	6	5
Non-state firms	74	5	13	5	6	4
Total	1498		16	166	337	979

Source: Author's collection.

Table 7 reports the targets of land-expropriation protests. It shows that for most land requisition protests, protest targets were concentrated at all levels of local governments; 52% of the protest targets were township or village governments, and 36% were prefecture or city-level governments. During the 2013–2018 period, there was a significant upward movement from the grassroots level to higher-level governments. In 2008–2012, land requisition protests targeting prefecture or city-level governments accounted for 28% of all incidents, increasing to 40% during the 2013–2018 period. Generally speaking, villagers' resistance is often caused by the behavior of cadres at the village and town level, e.g. village cadres who privately sell land or keep land compensation for themselves. However, in recent years, city-level governments have also increasingly been involved in land requisition disputes. It also happens that some protesters turn to a target prefecture or city-level authority because of their belief in its willingness and ability to help address their problems caused by local cadres. They approach the higher-level authorities demanding a response from the government and a correction of local cadres' wrongdoings (cf. Zweig 2000).

For example, in Case 3, villagers in Anhui blocked a national highway to force the government to release village representatives in a land-seizure dispute. The county police used deception to lure two villagers' representatives to the local Public Security Bureau. Later, they were detained at the City Detention Center. After learning of their arrests, the villagers walked onto the National Highway No. 104 to form a blockade, demanding that the Bengbu prefecture authorities intervene to resolve their dispute. Only after being coerced by the villagers' radical tactics, did the authorities release the villagers' representatives, leading the villagers to disperse (Feixinwen (Not-News) 2016c; Renminbao 2016).

Table 8 shows violent protests as a proportion of land seizure-related collective resistance. A major explanation for the use of violence in protests interprets violence as the result of frustration, desperation, and weakness (Gurr 1970; Jasper 1997). On the whole, violence is common in land seizure protests. Between 2000 and 2018, the proportion of violent acts such as clashes between protesters and the police as well as vandalism

Table 8. Violence of land-seizure protest events in rural China.

	2000–18		00–02	03–07	08–12	13–18
	N	%	%	%	%	%
		100	100	100	100	100
Nonviolent protests	615	41	63	46	49	37
Violent protests	896	59	38	54	51	63
Total	1511		16	167	338	990

Source: Author's collection.

Table 9. Police responses to land-seizure protest events in rural China.

	2000–18		00–02	03–07	08–12	13–18
	N	%	%	%	%	%
		100	100	100	100	100
Stand Guard	161	11	6	17	14	8
Disperse	282	19	25	24	16	19
Arrest	802	53	25	35	45	59
No Show	272	18	44	24	25	14
Total	1517		16	168	340	993

Source: Author's collection.

accounted for 59%, whereas non-violent protests accounted for 41% of land seizure-related collective resistance incidents. As far as time trends are concerned, the proportion of violent land-seizure protests from 2013 to 2018 was as high as 63%, starting at 51% from the period of 2008–2012. It suggests that there has been widespread social discontent over land expropriation under Xi Jinping's rule, leading to increasingly violent protests. Of the 11 large-scale land requisition protests during the 2016–2018 period in Table 5, five of them involved villager violence and conflicts between citizens and security forces.

For example, in Case 11, villagers in Guangdong staged a three-day sit-in at the town government protesting the illicit selling of farmland. When the town government sent 20–30 city management officers to confiscate the protesters' banners, physical altercations between the two sides erupted. In Case 10, villagers in Zhejiang protesting over unfair demolition compensation clashed with riot police, breaking down their blockade, storming and occupying the town government offices. Subsequently, the villagers were suppressed by riot police, with some of them getting arrested and injured.

Table 9 illustrates the frequency distribution of police behavior patterns in peasant protests against land seizures. At the site of a collective protest, the police may utilize a variety of reactions ranging from complete absence, to standing guard but not intervening, to dispersing the crowd, and to the extreme of arresting protesters, thus showing the state's different modes of reaction in the face of social protest. Table 9 shows that from 2000 to 2018, the proportion of the three types of police response patterns – namely arresting protesters, dispersing protesters, and standing guard – were at 53%, 19%, and 11%, respectively. Since 2000, the percentage of police use of force has steadily increased. From the late Jiang Zemin period to the Hu-Wen administration, and to the current leadership under Xi Jinping, instances in which police arrested protesters accounted for 25% (2000–2002), 35% (2003–2007), 45% (2008–2012), and 59% (2013–2018) of all rural land seizure protests, respectively. Since Xi took office, local governments faced with collective land seizure protests have been adopting harsher countermeasures than previous administrations. The Chinese government has resorted to repression more frequently than before, most likely because it possesses limited organizational control over the peasants. It seems that the Chinese government finds it to be a more feasible method of reducing and deterring protests if accommodating protesters' demands proves to be too costly.

Concessions and repression

The data shows that social protests in China – including land expropriation protests – increased rapidly from 2000 to 2014, but have declined since 2015. When more rural

land was expropriated, peasant protests occurred more frequently, gained more momentum, and diffused across more localities. The central government has moved to rein in abusive and corrupt land expropriation, halted local governments' drive for further land taking to some extent, and may have reduced peasant protests. Meanwhile, China's overall economic growth has declined steadily since 2012. As a result, much of the real estate in the cities became stranded assets, thus slowing down land acquisition for public infrastructure and urban development (Dericks, Potts, and Caldecott 2018; Stevenson and Li 2018).

Concessions and repression (or threat of repression) are the primary methods that the local governments employ to demobilize protests, which played a role in reversing the upward protest trend from 2014 to 2015. The strategy of 'buying stability' (*hua qian mai pingan*, literally meaning 'paying cash for peace') is the most prevalent means of pacifying aggrieved citizens involved in labor, land rights, and property disputes (Su and He 2010; Lee and Zhang 2013; Elfstrom and Kuruvilla 2014; Heurlin 2016). Chinese local governments have attempted to accommodate the economic demands of peasants who were victims of land seizure. 'Buying stability' reflects the local government's eagerness to preserve stability before aggrieved peasants swarm the streets. The practice seems to have effected some positive change, and it has become a lasting mechanism (Lee and Zhang 2013; Heurlin 2016).

The essence of buying stability is not the amount of payment but the processes leading to it. It is through grassroots efforts of 'mass work, thought works, and education work' that state power is practically realized (Lee and Zhang 2013). For protesters, their family and social relationships may deliver unbearable pressure to them. For example, before resorting to violent suppression, local officials may adopt some tactics to quell resistance; including the mobilization of intermediaries such as hired thugs (Chen 2017a; Ong 2018), relatives and acquaintances (Deng and O'Brien 2013; O'Brien and Deng 2015a), as well as neighborhood committees and clan organizations (Mattingly 2016; Deng 2017). These methods are the most prevalent means of pacifying the aggrieved in land disputes. Furthermore, bureaucratic rewards like urban *hukou* and social welfare benefits may be compensated for the loss of affected villagers' insurance in exchange for their cooperation in the expropriation process (Hsing 2010; Chuang 2014; Cai 2016). However, purchased stability and resorting to relational connections cannot be easily applied on a large-scale basis because of the high costs involved. Hence, many local authorities fail to fully accommodate protesters because financial resources are inadequate and all possible connections have been used up.

Apart from concessions, repression is equally – if not more – important in explaining the downward trend of peasants' protests against land expropriation after 2014. As previously noted, under Xi's leadership, local governments have been more repressive in coping with protests against land seizures and therefore more likely to arrest protesters. The state's crackdown on certain disadvantaged groups, including peasants who lost their land, has become particularly serious. Chinese peasants are considered inferior both socially and economically, and thus are more likely to be met with fierce repression during protests (Chen 2017b; 2020). Furthermore, thanks to sophisticated digital technology, the Chinese government has pursued a surveillance state of immense scale. It has enhanced information collection and internal security, elevating mass surveillance to cope with collective protest and resistance (Shahbaz 2018). Intensified surveillance has

advanced the state's capacity for preventive repression. Information facilitates preventive repression because it not only reveals citizens' underlying preferences, but identifies individuals for the type and level of grievance they possess (Greitens 2019). During collective protests, local mobile networks are shut down, and social media apps blocked. A broad use of repression tactics may have effectively reduced the number and scale of peasant protests.

Last but not least, strict censorship has also reduced the number of reported protests. Under Xi's regime, the government has implemented an unprecedented tightening of internet controls and codified its policy within the law (Lei 2017). China's censors have reined in blogs, social media, and search engines, and effectively eradicated any 'incorrectly-oriented' information. As a result, information and blog posts on provocative collective protests may be blocked on social media platforms, and news reports may be censored.

Discussion and conclusion

Social protests have persisted in China over the past two decades despite the government's efforts to ensure social stability. This study, using news reports as the source of information on events, shows that protests of different social origins – including urban residents, rural villagers, and land-lost peasants – all reveal similar trends with frequencies reaching a peak in 2014, before slowly declining and then dropping significantly from 2017 to 2018. It is worth noting that another study, drawing data from the Internet and identifying more than 100,000 collective action events that appeared on social media from 2010 to 2017 in China, also generates similar findings; it shows the number of collective action events reached its peak in the years of 2013–2014, and declined sharply since 2016 (Zhang and Pan 2019).

Over time, more cities in diffused locations experienced protests over land seizures. Local governments monopolized land use in China and relied heavily on land revenue. Driven by local development and revenue generation, local governments have used force to deal with resisting peasants. Unlawful land seizures, inadequate and unfair compensation, and forced demolition continue to be a crucial basis of grievances among peasants involved in land disputes with authorities.

Both concessions and repression have played their role in pacifying protesters and quelling resistance. However, the case studies on large-scale protests presented in this article illustrate that repression has its limits. First, it does not always deter protest leaders or participants, despite the repressive environment. One reason is the persistence of the sources of societal conflict. A major target of blame among the land-lost peasants is local government agencies. If local government agencies continue to abuse their power or ignore peasants' rights, grievances will remain. As long as the existing channels of conflict resolution are perceived to be ineffective, and the government faces difficulties in demobilizing protesters, collective protests remain the most viable option for peasants. Secondly, repression may damage the regime's legitimacy. The government cannot rely entirely on fierce repression because it delegitimizes its image as the 'people's government.' Local governments in China are obliged to maintain social stability and strengthen the state's legitimacy. If disputes are not adequately or fairly resolved, excessive repression may facilitate a radicalization and persistence of collective action. Repression gives

rise to pent-up grievances and thus may lead to more violent action. If the government continues to utilize repressive tactics, the regime may face a threat serious enough to challenge the power of its current political leadership (Cai 2008, 2010; Chen and Kang 2016; Lei 2017; O'Brien and Deng 2015b)

Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese government has taken an approach of eliminating independent social organizations, repressing critical individual activists; thus, creating an atomized society. A weak society enables local governments to continually abuse power and cause conflict. However, although unorganized peasants are believed to be less challenging to the regime, it is also difficult for the government to extend organizational control over them. Despite the government's control and repression, the sheer number of individuals in the countryside outmatches the government's energy and resources. Therefore, legitimacy building remains as important as authoritarian control because the level of an autocrat's legitimacy determines the size of its opposition in times of political crisis.

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