

Bounded Collectivism: Approaching Rural Land Rights and Labor Through “Natural Villages” in Southwest China 限定的集産主義 中国南西部の「自然村」を通じて農村地帯の土地所有権と労働を考察する

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Editor's note: The original posted on August 4 inadvertently omitted a large section of the article. The complete article has been reposted on August 8, 2014.

Abstract

By shedding light on the enduring social identities of rural settlement communities, often referred to as “natural villages” (自然村) by the current Chinese government, this article provides a new approach to the formation of China’s rural collective land ownership system from the 1950s to the present. It reveals how a unique landholding structure, which I term “bounded collectivism,” was initially formed in southwest China as a result of the contestation and negotiation between the socialist state aiming to establish collective land ownership and rural settlement communities seeking exclusive control over land resources within their borders. Significant elements of that collective land ownership system would be perpetuated while accommodating “natural villages” in the three decades since the abolition of the communes and the creation of a system of household contracts.

Key words: China, bounded collectivism, rural land ownership, natural villages, rural settlement communities

As a fundamental social and economic institution that shapes the lives of more than half of China’s population, China’s rural

collective land ownership system has been studied by scholars from multiple perspectives. As for how this land property regime was formed, it is well known that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) abolished the previous private land ownership system and implemented collective ownership across the countryside (Chan, Madsen, and Unger 1992; Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden 1991; Oi 1989; Ruf 1998; Selden 1993; Siu 1989). During the process, the rural administrative and economic structure of the commune-brigade-production team was set up. The production team then became the lowest-level collective land-management unit and the most basic administrative unit to which the vast majority of the rural population was administratively bound from 1955-1983. In examining the campaigns and movements initiated by the state, as well as the new social and political structures imposed on rural society, the existing literature reveals the power of the Chinese state in creating a new socialist land ownership system. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the role played by another equally important social organizing force in this transformation—the “natural villages” (自然村), at least two million of which are estimated to exist in China’s vast rural areas.¹

What then is a “natural village?” It is a settlement community, China’s most basic rural residence unit. For the rural populace, it refers to local residents’ sense of what is “local and long-standing”² and therefore embodies long-

established relationships that govern settlements, territories, agricultural production, ancestral graves, kinship, and the worship of local deities. “Natural villages” are in fact what the current Chinese government uses to define these communities, despite the fact that the formation of these communities was shaped by complex social and economic factors, therefore, they are not “natural” at all.³ The local terms for these communities vary in different regions. The most common term is *cun* (村); others include *tun* (屯), *ying* (营), *zhaizi* (寨子), *zhuang* (庄), *wanzi* (湾子), and *bang* (浜), all of which can be roughly translated as “village” or “hamlet”. This article, however, does not use the word “village” to refer to these communities, because the “administrative village” or “village committee,” which is a unit in the current rural administrative structure, is also often referred to as “village” for short by many scholars and the government. In other words, in the social and political context of the People’s Republic of China, the concept of village encompasses the dual meanings of administrative villages and natural villages. Yet my fieldwork experience made clear that differentiating between these two kinds of villages is crucial to understanding rural land ownership and social relations of labor and income distribution.

Natural villages have been a major focus of several generations of anthropologists and historians of China (Duara 1988; Fei 1939; Fitzgerald 1941; Fei and Zhang 1945; Fried 1953; Gamble 1933; Hsu 1945; Huang 1985; Kulp 1925; Lin 1948; Wolf 1974; Yang 1945). Their studies demonstrate that prior to 1949 these communities not only functioned as the fundamental organizational node in rural areas but also exhibited stable and distinct identities in various ways, the most important of which included restricted community membership, exclusive control over community land, and distinguishable social and economic organizations.

In his study of the rural economy in Jiangsu and Yunnan Provinces, Fei Xiaotong (1939, 1945) is especially explicit about the exclusiveness of community identity. He reveals a series of phenomena defining the social and economic boundaries between community members and outsiders: restrictions were imposed on who could be considered a community native resident; only community members were permitted to use, lease, or buy the public lands of the village; outsiders customarily did not participate in important voluntary organizations that shaped the political and religious life in the village; and so on. After Fei, other scholars have addressed how a natural village’s social and economic identity is maintained in various social and economic spheres. In the area of popular religion, for example, Arthur Wolf (1974) shows how local deities were worshipped as officials holding territorial posts and thus defined the community boundaries. In his study of rural communities in north and south China during the first half of the twentieth century, Philip Huang emphasizes the “importance of supra-kinship territorial bonds” that existed in these communities. Huang argues that, with their insularity and solidarity, these traditional residential communities “had far greater stability and continuity” (1990, 145). Prasenjit Duara (1988) similarly concludes that although the natural village in late imperial society was not the sole, or perhaps even the dominant, node of coordination in the cultural nexus, it was an important one. For instance, the community managed different collective activities, the most prominent being religious ceremonies barring outsiders. Furthermore, Duara discusses the interaction between the settlement communities and the modern state. With the advent of the late Qing reforms and state-building attempts during the Republican period, a formal village government with taxing power emerged. As a result, the village leadership’s territorial jurisdiction over land was strengthened during the Republic, although the disarticulation of local political

brokers from the cultural nexus in rural society weakened their moral authority and created a less cohesive community identity.

From the extensive research of the historians and anthropologists, it is safe to say that an important feature of rural Chinese society before 1949 was the exclusivity and solidarity of the natural village, which maintained powerful control over both social and physical domains. Yet we know relatively little about what happened to these communities during the process of transforming the “old,” private land property relations into new, socialist ones after 1949. Many critical questions arise. For example, as socialism emerged in the rural areas, what kind of relationship existed between natural villages and the lowest-level collective land-management units created by the state? Did the process of setting up new collective land-management units change or disrupt the previous boundaries among natural villages? Did these communities try to maintain their social identities and long-held domains during this dramatic process and thereby shape the structure of the new land property regime? This article aims to explore these important questions.

Based on research since 2002 in Fuyuan (富源) County, Yunnan Province, southwest China, this article points out that the role played by natural villages in forming the rural collective land ownership system has largely been overlooked. In fact, the state is only one of the major forces involved in forming this land property regime; natural villages constitute another one. During collectivization, natural villages in Fuyuan persistently resisted collectivist approaches that aimed to disrupt the traditionally held boundaries that defined these communities. The enduring identity of each community limited collectivism and land redistribution to its boundaries and prevented strict egalitarian land redistribution among communities. Facing such resilience and persistence, the state retreated from its most

ambitious attempts to override the social and physical boundaries of these communities in the process of establishing a collective land ownership system. It not only acknowledged the land rights of natural villages but also incorporated these communities into its administrative and economic structure. Since most natural villages in China’s southwest are small or medium-sized, often with several hundred people, they functioned as the basis for the lowest level rural administrative and land-management units—the production teams.⁴ This incorporation into the state administrative structure provided a natural village with new social, economic, and political mechanisms to reinforce its claim over land within its traditional territory. The exclusivity of each community’s land rights was thus institutionalized. Moreover, as each team/natural village became the primary locus of labor and income distribution, the solidarity and insularity of each community was further reinforced. A landholding structure that I term “bounded collectivism” was formed as a result. This bounded collectivism has produced a more complex political mechanism and state-society nexus at the village level than previous studies have shown and has important implications for how the two current levels of village administration—the administrative village and its constituent villagers’ groups—share and divide land rights in the post-commune era of distribution of land-use rights to households.

Tenacious Domain and Persistent Identity: *Zhaizi* (寨子) in Fuyuan

Fuyuan (富源) is a mountainous county in east Yunnan Province, where the Han comprise 91 percent of the population and other ethnic groups make up the rest. As elsewhere in China, every natural village in Fuyuan has a specific name, such as Xiaopulizhai (小普里寨), Huangnihe (黄泥河), Chenjiazhai (陈家寨), Dapingzi (大坪子), or Guojiacaozi (郭家槽子). But the general term used by local people to refer to natural villages is *zhaizi* (寨子).

Translated literally into English, “*zhaizi*” means a village protected by a line of strong posts. This usage probably derives from southwest China’s history as a frontier region, where self-defense and protection was of great concern to every community. “*Zhaizi*” is in fact a term used widely by ethnic communities in southwest China; many Han Chinese adopted this term as they settled in the region. The word “*zhaizi*,” along with terms used in other regions to address a natural village, such as “*wanzi*” (湾子) in Hubei and “*bang*” (浜) in Jiangsu, have long been part of everyday language in local communities. When local people need to address the rural administrative structure imposed by the government from above, they say the “village committee (村委会)” or the “administrative village (行政村),” which usually consist of a number of *zhaizi*.



Landscape
Farmland
Rice paddies

There are 1,788 *zhaizi*/natural villages in Fuyuan. Most are medium-sized, with a few hundred residents. But there are also very large *zhaizi*, with several hundred households and populations of more than three thousand, and very small *zhaizi*, with fewer than ten households and several dozen residents, mainly mountain villages. The distribution of *zhaizi* in Fuyuan is shaped by the mountainous topography; the distance between *zhaizi* thus varies. Some *zhaizi* are several miles apart in the deep mountains; others share borders or are too close for an outsider to distinguish between their borders. Most *zhaizi* communities in Fuyuan are agnatically mixed communities, that is, they are composed of lineages with different surnames.





The *zhaizi* of Yizuo
The *zhaizi* of Guojiacaozi
The *zhaizi* of Sahei

When I started fieldwork in Fuyuan County in 2002, I had planned to study rural land disputes. It never occurred to me that natural villages could constitute an important topic for my research. To understand why and how disputes occurred in local communities, I first interviewed several dozen rural families. From the responses, I noticed an interesting phenomenon: many villagers were unsure whether their *zhaizi* should be called an elementary cooperative, a production team, or a villagers' group. For instance, when asked about their administrative unit, a seventy-year-old might say that he/she was from the Fifth District; a middle-aged person might claim that he/she was from a certain production team; and a young village cadre might tell me that he/she was from a specific villagers' group in a specific administrative village in a specific township. These answers reflect exposure to various rural administrative structures adopted

at different times during the People's Republic. Facing rapidly changing administrative arrangements, many villagers were confused; some were not even aware of the name, much less the boundaries of their administrative unit. However, I never met a villager who was unsure about which *zhaizi* he /she belonged to.



Market day

I began to wonder what had sustained the identities of these settlement communities throughout the socialist era. My subsequent field investigation revealed that despite radical political movements and campaigns that have swept over rural areas since 1949 to remove "feudal remnants," certain traditional elements and mechanisms have shown remarkable resilience and continue to play an important role in sustaining the social and physical boundaries of every *zhaizi*. These elements include, but are not limited to, restricted community membership, ancestral graves, kinship and lineage, labor invested in agricultural fields, and territorial deities. Here I will focus on three of these elements.

Restricted community membership

A natural village is a restricted community, not one open to all people. Historically, neither its boundaries nor its membership have been set by the state. Throughout China's late imperial

period and the Republic, a natural village always had detailed rules determining who was a native resident of the community. Setting up specific criteria defining community membership enabled a natural village to build up invisible boundaries between insiders and outsiders and to form a relatively exclusive community (Cohen 2005; Duara 1988; Fei 1939; Potter 1970). After 1949, this restriction on community membership didn't disappear, although the criteria for community membership changed. In Fuyuan, whether one received a share of land during the 1952 land reform was determined not only by the amount of land one previously owned, but also by whether one was considered a native of the *zhaizi*. Villages tended to define their members as those who owned land, a house, or ancestral graves in the local community. Lineage membership also helped confirm settlement rights in a community (Cohen 2005; Duara 1988; Faure 1986; Huang 1985). Many outsiders residing in a community were engaged in special professions such as barbers, millers, shoemakers, grocers, silversmiths, or medicine dealers. None of these people possessed land before 1949, nor were most considered natives of the *zhaizi*, even those who were born there. Although the government decided to allocate land to all landless people, including these "outsiders," other *zhaizi* members simply thought the outsiders were beneficiaries of government policy. On the other hand, certain people who did not live in *zhaizi* before land reform were nevertheless considered to be *zhaizi* members. Many of these were people whose family had lived in a *zhaizi* for generations and had ancestral graves there. They often ran small businesses in the cities or other regions. When they returned to their native *zhaizi* at the time of the land reform, they were still regarded as *zhaizi* members and were given a share of land if they previously owned minimum or no land in the *zhaizi*, that is, if they were recognized as belonging to the revolutionary classes including poor peasants and landless households.

During the collective era, the definition of community membership was even stricter when *zhaizi* became rural collectives (production teams or brigades) and every villager became a member of a production team under a brigade in a commune.⁵ New rules were added to old customs, including a person's residence, how one obtained one's grain, and whether one had income other than from farming. These new rules were implemented most strictly when land was allocated to individual households through contracts under the Household Responsibility System, the first major post-Mao reform of the rural collectives. A villager's right to a share of land lay in his/her membership in the team/*zhaizi*. Once established as a team member, a person could receive a share of land regardless of gender or age. Since the land resources owned by teams/*zhaizi* varied, the per capita amount and quality of farmland that could be distributed to households also differed among communities. One's membership therefore determined not only eligibility to receive a share of land but also the amount and quality of land one could receive. For example, every member in Pingdi, a team/*zhaizi* in south Fuyuan, received 0.6 *mu* of rice paddy and 0.6 *mu* of dry land, while in Guojiacaozi, a small mountain *zhaizi* in central Fuyuan, the per capita share of land was 0.4 *mu* of rice paddy and 1.6 *mu* of dry land.⁶ These facts illustrate the significant social and economic consequences arising from membership in a *zhaizi* community.

Ancestral graves

While definitions and conditions for being a community member might change from one community to another and over different historical periods, a *zhaizi*'s territory shows much less flexibility. Local residents are well aware of what land belongs to their *zhaizi*. It is not unusual for several *zhaizi* to share common land in which firewood is gathered or sheep and cattle are allowed to graze, yet this does not mean that each *zhaizi*'s boundaries are not

clearly known and maintained. Even under the special circumstance of an exclave, that is, a plot of land owned by one *zhaizi* but located within the territory of another, ownership of the land continues to be acknowledged by local residents over the centuries. However, unlike the territory of a modern administrative unit such as the present administrative village, the township, or the county, a *zhaizi*'s territory cannot always be verified by topographical marks set up by the government. Rather, it is often established through both visible and invisible landmarks such as ancestral graves and territorial deities that villagers persistently maintain their *zhaizi*'s domains.

At the very beginning of my fieldwork in Fuyuan, I ran into a serious conflict over ancestral graves involving local families, families moving to live in the cities whose ancestral roots remained in the local *zhaizi*, governmental officials in the county and the province, and the police. I was surprised that a dispute over a few graves could involve so many people and excite such passions. However, as my fieldwork proceeded, the important role played by lineage graveyards in defining identity in a *zhaizi* and binding villagers to their native communities became evident. As an elderly villager told me, "Graves tell who you are and which *zhaizi* you live in."

Graves are believed to protect and bring good fortune to the offspring of the dead, and they have the status of quasi-private property, despite the fact that China's rural land is by law collectively owned and private land ownership is prohibited. Throughout the history of the People's Republic, the Fuyuan government never challenged local lineages' control over their graves unless the locations of the graves conflicted with important project requirements such as a highway, power plant, mine, or reservoir. The land reform of 1952, for example, did not redistribute land that held graves, even the graves of landlords. At the height of collectivization in the late 1950s and

early 1960s, the issue of family graves did not arise, although most death-ritual practices were criticized as "feudal superstitions" and many were forced to go underground. In 1962 the Fuyuan government issued regulations regarding graves: a grave located in collective farmland should have an open space of 1.5 *zhang* (丈)⁷ on all sides, and owners of graves should not use them as a pretext for claiming rights to the land where the graves were located. During the Cultural Revolution, certain traditional death rituals were prohibited, and some graves belonging to families of landlords or rich peasants were desecrated. Yet even then most graves were left untouched.

The status of quasi-private property, as well as the sacredness and efficaciousness associated with ancestral graves, has led to an even more complicated situation affecting property relations among local communities: ancestral graves give villagers a sense of entitlement to the land where the graves are located, not just the graves themselves. Very often "our ancestors' graves are over there" has been used as a strong argument for claiming a *zhaizi*'s land ownership rights, even during the socialist period. Since the 1950s, the Fuyuan government has repeatedly criticized and prohibited the "superstitious and backward" custom of "using graves to occupy mountains and land" (以坟占山, 以坟占地). However, despite local government efforts, *zhaizi* have repeatedly used graves to claim land ownership rights, causing conflicts between different *zhaizi* or between *zhaizi* and state organizations.

The dispute between two *zhaizi*, Yizuo (亦佐) and Muguaping (木瓜坪), clearly reveals how local people associate graves with land ownership.⁸ Yizuo and Muguaping don't share borders; two other *zhaizi* are between them. Yizuo had a stretch of land, an exclave, at the edge of Muguaping. On this land is a graveyard owned by an Yizuo family which has been in use for more than a century. In 1962 this land was allocated to Muguaping by the county

government for administrative convenience. Over the decades, Yizuo villagers have felt that Muguaping had inappropriately taken their land and that it should be returned to the Yizuo people and be farmed by them. A clash occurred in 2000 when Yizuo villagers claimed that Muguaping villagers had damaged several graves as they farmed surrounding land. Yizuo villagers seized an ox belonging to a Muguaping family that had been farming near the graveyard; the villagers butchered the ox and divided the meat among members of their *zhaizi*. The aggrieved Muguaping family sued the Yizuo villagers at the county court. In court the Muguaping villagers provided official documents issued in 1962 proving their ownership of the land. The Yizuo villagers used the old custom concerning graves to defend their land rights. In the end, the Yizuo villagers lost the lawsuit and were ordered by the court to pay the plaintiff the price of an ox. However, seeing this conflict as an Yizuo attempt to restore ownership over the exclave, an old village cadre told me, “Such a court order can never settle the issue, because Yizuo villagers simply do not accept it in their hearts and this will surely lead to more trouble later.”

Territorial deities

As elsewhere throughout China, popular religion in Fuyuan has played a significant role in regulating community life and shaping local identity. Deities worshipped in Fuyuan are “localized” because they define the boundaries of *zhaizi* communities and are venerated as if they were officials holding territorial posts. Every *zhaizi* has its earth god, usually in a shrine about one meter high. Dotting the Fuyuan landscape, the earth gods are usually worshipped and offered sacrifices on the second day of the Lunar New Year. Every *zhaizi* also worships its own mountain god (*shanshen* 山神), believed to be in charge of the weather and petitioned for favorable conditions. A local anecdote I heard during my fieldwork illustrates well the view of mountain gods as

territorial deities: in 2002, people in Faxiang (发祥) *zhaizi* did not offer the usual annual sacrifice to their mountain god. That year heavy hail fell and damaged much of their summer crops. Nearby *zhaizi*, which dutifully conducted their annual worship ritual, did not experience the disaster.



A shrine for the earth god

In the spring of 2003 I observed the worship ritual of the mountain god in the *zhaizi* of Xiaopuzi (小铺子). As a guest I was welcome to observe the entire process, but as an outsider I was not invited to participate in the rituals. Likewise, people from other *zhaizi* were excluded from participation. Local deities once again functioned as a principal focus of local identity based on natural settlements. These collective worship activities annually reconfirm a *zhaizi* community’s territory. It is interesting that in the Maoist era, village cadres generally avoided participating in religious activities. Today they frequently organize worship rituals of local deities, especially the leaders of the villagers’ groups that often are *zhaizi* communities.

To conclude, throughout the era of the People’s Republic, certain traditional elements, such as restricted community membership, ancestral graves, and territorial deities, have shown resilience and continued to play important roles

in maintaining each *zhaizi*'s identity and territory. However, a *zhaizi*'s social identity and physical boundaries are maintained not merely by the resilience of these elements. More importantly, it is through the interaction between *zhaizi* communities and the state-initiated collectivization program that these communities continue to lay claim to land within their territories and reinforce solidarity among their members. As the next section shows, this has been accomplished through the formation of a unique rural landholding structure that I term "bounded collectivism," in which most *zhaizi* communities have become the basis for the lowest-level collective land-management unit, that is, the production teams in the collective era and the villagers' groups in the reform period.

The Making of Bounded Collectivism, 1952 to the Present

To illustrate the formation of bounded collectivism, I trace the histories of three *zhaizi* through the different stages of transforming land ownership in China's rural areas, beginning with the land reform period, followed by collectivization, the Great Leap Forward campaign, the people's commune period, the Great Cultural Revolution, the Household Responsibility System in the early 1980s, and further administrative reforms thereafter. The three *zhaizi* are: (1) Guojiacaozi (郭家槽子), a small *zhaizi* in the middle of Fuyuan with 53 households and a population of about 290; (2) Pingdi (平地), a medium-sized *zhaizi* with 127 households and about 600 people in south Fuyuan; and (3) Huangnihe (黄泥河), a very large community next to Pingdi, with 680 households and more than 3,000 people.

My research shows that since the beginning of the People's Republic, rural administrative arrangements in Fuyuan have changed more than a dozen times as a result of the socialist state's efforts to broaden and deepen its control over rural society. The three *zhaizi*

were assigned to different districts, communes, brigades, and were given different administrative names, but in terms of population composition, location, distinctive identities, and property relations among the communities, the three settlement communities experienced little change. Moreover, the persistence of *zhaizi* identity gradually led the state to incorporate *zhaizi* into its political and economic structure.

The 1952 land reform—zhaizi as the basic unit of land redistribution

Soon after the Communist victory in Yunnan Province in 1949, the new government started to restructure the sub-county administration and adopted a district-township structure (区乡制). Although this basic administrative structure did not change until 1958, districts and townships under the county were frequently dissolved and reestablished. Their names and territories were also subject to change at the will of the higher authorities. In 1950, for example, Fuyuan County had four districts and twelve townships. In 1952, to facilitate the upcoming land reform, the county government added a new district and significantly reduced the sizes of the townships, making the number of districts seven and townships 149. In this context, *zhaizi* were frequently reassigned to different districts and townships. In 1950, Guojiacaozi was in Desheng Township (德胜乡), Fifth District, while both Pingdi and Huangnihe were in Pinghuang Township (平黄镇), Sixth District. In 1952 Guojiacaozi was moved to Nanchong Township (南冲乡), Songzishan District (松子山区), and Pingdi and Huangnihe to Pinghuang Township, Huangnihe District (黄泥河区). In 1955 Guojiacaozi was transferred back to Desheng Township, Songzishan District, while Pingdi and Huangnihe remained where they had been.⁹

Following the reconstruction of the sub-county administration, the land reform started. In

Fuyuan, the land reform started in January 1952 and ended eleven months later. As in many areas, land reform in Fuyuan was marked by violent conflict. But in the process of land reform, the boundaries of *zhaizi* communities sanctioned over centuries of tradition remained unchanged. Serving as the basic units of land redistribution, most *zhaizi* maintained the integrity of their land.

In 1952, each of Fuyuan's 149 townships organized land reform within its territory. Local cadres could have adopted an egalitarian method by which land owned by different *zhaizi* in a township would be pooled and divided into equal shares for every farmer in the township. In reality, however, land redistribution took place within the boundaries of each *zhaizi* and left intact unequal landholding among communities. The land resources of each *zhaizi* thus determined the quantity and quality of land distributed to every community member. For example, an average household of four to five people in the small *zhaizi* Guojiacaozi received around 10 *mu* of farmland. Not far away from Guojiacaozi, a household of the same size in an even smaller mountainous *zhaizi* Chenjiazhai received 15 to 20 *mu* of land, albeit sloping fields with low agricultural yields. In the fertile valleys in south Fuyuan, households in the *zhaizi* of Huangnihe received 3 to 4 *mu* of fertile fields.¹⁰

The same situation can be found in many other rural areas throughout China. In Hubei (湖北) Province, for instance, land reform proceeded in a way similar to that of Fuyuan, that is, egalitarian land distribution took place within each *wanzi* (湾子), the local equivalent of the *zhaizi*.¹¹ The average per capita land among *wanzi* communities, therefore, differed (Zhu and Wu 2006).

On a few occasions local cadres in Fuyuan did try to alter long-held boundaries among *zhaizi*. These readjustments often took place under two circumstances. First, for the convenience

of management and irrigation, the local government ordered some exclaves owned by certain *zhaizi* to be transferred to the *zhaizi* where they were located without compensation for the *zhaizi* that originally owned the land. Second, if significant inequality in landholding existed among neighboring *zhaizi* communities in a township, cadres sometimes ordered farmland-rich *zhaizi* to transfer land to farmland-poor ones. As no compensation was offered to the farmland-rich *zhaizi*, these transfers caused great discontent and tension among *zhaizi*. In Desheng Township, for example, village cadres had to persuade fellow villagers to follow the orders of the government. In the end, in most cases, no major adjustments were made; the majority of *zhaizi* kept most of the land that belonged to them.¹²

Similar resistance to the government's egalitarian initiatives across natural villages occurred in other regions. In Shaanxi Province (陕西), villagers of farmland-rich communities tried to conceal the amount of land owned by landlords in their communities so that land within their territories would not be transferred to other communities.¹³ The lower Yangzi Valley is another region where boundaries among natural villages were revised to achieve a more egalitarian landholding among the communities in a township. In Jiangsu Province, farmland-rich communities had to either give some of their land to poorer ones or allow households in the farmland-poor communities to migrate into their communities. Villagers in farmland-rich communities strongly opposed transferring their land to other communities, and used various strategies to sabotage land transfers. Facing strong discontent, the township governments in Jiangsu Province made some compromises. Farmland-rich villages were allowed to keep more land so that their average per capita farmland was higher than the average for the whole township.¹⁴

In brief, data from Fuyuan and other parts of

China show that the land reform was to varying degrees based on the new socialist state's acknowledgment of and acquiescence to the traditions and rules governing property relations among natural villages. Throughout the People's Republic, the long-held boundaries among *zhaizi* confirmed by land reform have generally been upheld by local governments. This acknowledgment is especially evident when a land dispute occurs. If a *zhaizi* engages in a dispute with another *zhaizi* or other social institution over a piece of land, the *ultimate* evidence of the ownership of the disputed land is often the land ownership certificates issued during the land reform to individual households in the *zhaizi*. The logic followed, not only by *zhaizi* communities and rural households but also by the government, is that if a family in a *zhaizi* received title to the land during land reform, the land belongs to this community.

In 1994, for example, a dispute broke out between Yaozhannancun (腰站南村) in Fuyuan County and Dabanqingcun (打板箐村) in Zhanyi (沾益) County. Although the two *zhaizi* administratively belong to different counties, they share borders. Both *zhaizi* claimed ownership over a mountain rich in mineral resources that was located between them. Their dispute culminated in a clash involving several hundred people from both *zhaizi* on the disputed hill in July 1994. People were injured, and ten thousand tree saplings planted by Yaozannancun were pulled out. When the Fuyuan County government stepped in to adjudicate, the key evidence it presented to Qujing Prefecture was eighty-three land ownership certificates issued to families in Yaozhannancun during the 1952 land reform, which proved that the disputed land was owned by these families. And the key argument of the Fuyuan County government was that "we have always managed the land within the boundaries set up during the land reform."

Early collectivization (1953-1957)—the integrity of a zhaizi's land and the initial

organization of rural labor

Soon after land reform, the CCP began to push for collectivization to stimulate rural productivity and, in conjunction with market controls, to facilitate the government's access to a larger share of the agricultural surplus to invest in industry, obtain foreign exchange, and feed China's rapidly growing cities (Selden 1993). Starting in 1953, rural collectivization took three successive forms: mutual-aid teams, elementary agricultural cooperatives, and advanced agricultural cooperatives (collectives). In the process, private land ownership was abolished by stages in favor of collective land ownership and collective labor. In spite of these drastic changes, which in most communities were telescoped into a three-year period or less, *zhaizi* boundaries remained essentially intact.

Both elementary and advanced agricultural cooperatives were formed by merging a number of small to medium-sized *zhaizi*, with advanced cooperatives generally incorporating more *zhaizi* than an elementary cooperative. Most *zhaizi* first became a production team of an elementary cooperative and then of an advanced cooperative. Each *zhaizi*/team labored on and obtained income from its own land. Pingdi joined several neighboring *zhaizi* to form an elementary cooperative and then joined additional *zhaizi* to form an advanced cooperative. Located in deep mountains, Guojiacaozi formed an elementary cooperative on its own. Three years later it joined other nearby small mountainous *zhaizi* to form an advanced cooperative. Because of its large size, Huangnihe was always a cooperative by itself, first an elementary cooperative and then an advanced cooperative. And it was always divided into a number of teams. The cooperative head could adjust land among its constituent teams, but not beyond the boundaries of Huangnihe.

At the stage of the advanced cooperative,

however, a fundamental change took place. In contrast to elementary cooperatives in which land ownership rights were preserved by households whose income depended in part on the amount of land invested in the cooperative, advanced cooperatives inaugurated the collective ownership of rural land. Private land ownership by individual households was abolished and *zhaizi* land formed the collective land of the production team. Remuneration was based exclusively on return to labor. The formation of advanced cooperatives enabled the government to exert stricter control over the rural economy through planning of agricultural production, compulsory purchases, and market control. The stage was set for the egalitarian allocation of land and harvest among *zhaizi* and therefore for the disruption of *zhaizi* boundaries.

Another important change that took place during early collectivization is the organization of collective labor. Within the framework of the elementary cooperative, individual households still owned land, but all land was pooled for collective use and management. Organized as a team in an elementary cooperative, residents of every *zhaizi* worked year-round on their land and were provided remuneration on the basis of both land investments (accounting for 30 percent of remuneration) and labor inputs (accounting for 70 percent of remuneration). At the stage of the advanced cooperatives, the relationship between private ownership of land and income was eliminated. Labor became the only yardstick of income. Individual households could legally withdraw from both types of cooperatives, but in reality it was nearly impossible to do so. In other words, when every *zhaizi* was turned into a rural collective unit, all rural residents were obligated to participate in collective labor.

The people's commune system (1958-1984)—disruption and reconfirmation of zhaizi boundaries

In 1958 the Great Leap Forward campaign expanded the scale of land ownership and cooperative production through the formation of large-scale people's communes. The previous district-township administrative system was replaced by a new system of commune-production brigade-production team. In 1958, twenty-three communes were established in Fuyuan, and the number increased to twenty-five in 1959. Meanwhile, 1,267 production teams were created.¹⁵ While most *zhaizi* became production teams, several very small adjacent *zhaizi* frequently formed one production team, and some very large *zhaizi* were divided into several brigades. Medium-sized Pingdi became a production team in Pulizhai Brigade, Huangnihe Commune. The large Huangnihe was divided into three brigades—Dongmen, Ximen, and Nanmen—with each further divided into two to three production teams. Guojiacaozi formed a production team in the Deshengping Brigade in Songzishan Commune.

During the Great Leap Forward, the government tightened control over agricultural production through the communes. Communes directly managed agricultural and sideline production and coordinated income distribution on a commune-wide scale. As a result, land, labor, implements, farm animals, and grain harvest were subject to egalitarian allocation (一平二调) among brigades and production teams within a commune or even among several communes. The management practice at the commune level transcended long-held *zhaizi* boundaries even though the *zhaizi* were not completely eliminated. This caused great distress among many *zhaizi* communities. In Huangnihe Commune, for example, a *zhaizi* called Daaози (大凹子) was ordered to give part of its farmland to a neighboring *zhaizi* called Faxiang (发祥). One retired cadre in Daaози complained to me, "Our high-quality rice paddy and dry land were taken away and given to Faxiang." In Desheng Commune, an elderly village cadre recalled

The hardworking teams produced more grain, but their harvest had to be given to other teams with food shortage problems. Nobody in the hardworking teams was happy about that. The hardworking teams were also given more land to till. The extra land often came from the less productive teams. And the less productive teams were not happy either because they feared that their land would be taken away permanently.¹⁶

The Great Leap Forward collapsed with disastrous economic and social consequences. A nosedive in agricultural production occurred as well as a severe famine that took the lives of an estimated twenty million to thirty million people nationwide.¹⁷ In Huangnihe Commune alone, 690 persons perished.¹⁸

In the face of the economic and political disasters caused by the Great Leap Forward, the CCP central leadership issued the *Sixty Articles on the People's Communes* in 1961 to readjust its course.¹⁹ The communes' authority and size were sharply reduced in the wake of the *Sixty Articles*. The previous 25 communes in Fuyuan were dissolved, and 9 districts and 138 smaller communes were created. Each district comprised 15 to 20 communes. The Fuyuan county government also reduced the sizes of some production teams and divided large teams into smaller ones. The number of production teams thus increased to 1,621.²⁰

The most important result of the new policy, nevertheless, was not administrative, but the reorganization of rural property relations and production. The 1962 readjustments established "three levels of ownership, with the production teams as primary owners" (三级所有, 队为基础).²¹ This means that each of the three levels of rural administration—commune, production brigade, and production

team—managed part of the rural land, with the production team controlling the major part and as the unit of income distribution. After 1962, 90 percent of China's rural land was managed by production teams, each assigned land with specific boundaries; team households worked on this land and divided the income from collective farming and sideline activities. The production brigades controlled around 5 percent of the land, much of it used as collective forests and for industry. The communes managed less than 5 percent of rural land, much of it designated for public use, such as agricultural machinery stations, fisheries, large collective forests, livestock farms, irrigation systems, health clinics, schools, and local industry.²² In the early 1980s when collective agriculture gave way to household contracting, communes were typically turned into townships, brigades into administrative villages, and production teams into villagers' groups. The management of rural land continued to be divided among the newly established townships, administrative villages, and villagers' groups.

As a result of the *Sixty Articles*, the land rights of the production team were considerably expanded. Targeting the egalitarian policies in the Great Leap Forward period, the twenty-first article of the *Sixty Articles* stipulated that, "All the land within the production teams belongs to the production teams. Land owned by the production teams, including the commune members' private plots, private hills, and residential land, cannot be rented, sold, or purchased.... The ownership of and the managing rights to land, draft animals, implements, forest, water surface, and grassland belong to the production teams, and this will not change for a long period."²³ Because land, labor, farm animals, and tools were assigned to the teams by this article, the 1962 policy is often referred to as the "Four Fixed" Policy (四固定). The implementation of this policy ended egalitarian allocation at local officials' discretion.

Because there are 1,788 *zhaizi/natural villages* in Fuyuan, we can say that most of the 1,621 teams created in 1962 coincide with average-sized *zhaizi*.²⁴ During the people's commune period, Guojiacaozi remained a production team but was placed under the Desheng Commune (previously the Desheng Brigade) in Fucun District. Pingdi and Huangnihe were assigned to the new Huangnihe Commune, now only a fourth of the size of the previous Huangnihe Commune, in the Huangnihe District. Pingdi remained a production team and Huangnihe continued to have three production brigades, with each further divided into three teams. Although Huangnihe and Pingdi share borders, Pingdi's land would never become part of Huangnihe's. The teams under the three Huangnihe brigades could only use land belonging to the Huangnihe *zhaizi* as a whole. As the production team became the most basic unit of agricultural production, income distribution, and accounting, the traditional *zhaizi* boundaries were not only reaffirmed but also *formally acknowledged*.

The implications of the 1962 Four Fixed policy were profound. Its acknowledgment of traditional boundaries among natural villages differed from that of the land reform in the early 1950s. During land reform, the state acknowledged the boundaries among natural villages by conducting land redistribution within each community. But the state didn't formally acknowledge the exclusive control of each natural village over its domain. During the 1962 readjustment period, *zhaizi/natural villages* in fact received official recognition as the lowest-level collective land-management units as well as the most basic rural administrative units at least in south China. In other words, facing the resilience and persistence of these communities in the course of the national crisis associated with the Great Leap collapse, the state retreated from its attempts to reorganize the fundamental structure of rural land ownership and productive relations. It acknowledged the

zhaizi's status as a relatively exclusive social unit by incorporating the *zhaizi* into its administrative and economic structure. As a result, the control of each community over its traditionally-held land was recognized and given institutional expression. Labor was organized and income distributed on the basis of the *zhaizi* as well. During the Great Leap Forward, a *zhaizi's* labor was subject to allocation at the will of commune leaders or even higher authorities. One team/*zhaizi* might be ordered to till the land of another, as discussed previously. From 1962 to the abolition of the people's commune system in the early 1980s, however, the leader of every production team had the power to organize agricultural production and distribute income within the team, thereby significantly strengthening the solidarity and insularity of each community.

It is important to note that during this period, just as during the land reform in the early 1950s and the Great Leap Forward, there were cases in which territorial relations among *zhaizi* were adjusted. In Desheng Commune, for instance, some teams that had performed extra work by tilling other teams' land during the Great Leap Forward were permitted to keep that land. As an elder cadre recalled, "Hardworking teams earned more land, which indeed became a great advantage later on." Land readjustment among *zhaizi* could also be caused by considerations of management convenience. Exclave land owned by some *zhaizi* was sometimes allocated to the *zhaizi* in which the exclave was located.

However, the importance of the 1962 Four Fixed policy remains the same even for the *zhaizi* in which land was taken away in the interest of achieving more egalitarian landholding among communities or for management convenience, because this policy allowed these *zhaizi* to restore their relatively exclusive control over the land still remaining in their territories as well. Since few

readjustments were made on the boundaries between teams/*zhaizi* in subsequent decades, *zhaizi* prerogatives were reinforced.

The 1962 Four Fixed policy has been widely supported by villagers and village cadres. They resort to official documents issued in 1962 whenever an ownership dispute occurs. As noted, the *ultimate* evidence of the ownership of disputed land is often the land ownership certificates issued during land reform to individual households in the *zhaizi*. But the official documents that *directly prove* the boundaries of a team/*zhaizi* are those issued during the Four Fixed policy period. Only when such documents are not available or can't be applied to solve a land ownership dispute will villagers and the local government use as evidence the land ownership certificates of individual households issued during land reform.²⁵

Fuyuan's population grew rapidly, from 260,000 people in 1962 to 435,000 in 1977. When the members of a team exceeded a few hundred, management became difficult. The team would then be divided into smaller teams. As a result, the number of production teams in Fuyuan increased from 1,621 in 1962 to 2,616 in 1980. But the long-held territorial relations among *zhaizi* communities remained unchanged. A team/*zhaizi* might be divided into more teams, but its boundaries didn't change. Land could be adjusted among the teams within the original *zhaizi* only. Some *zhaizi* took this opportunity to split with other *zhaizi* with whom they previously formed a production team. In Fucun Commune, for example, Xiaopuzi (小铺子) and Shuijingshan (水井边) were two small *zhaizi* that formed a production team from 1958 to 1973. As their populations grew, they agreed to split into two teams in 1973. Land was divided not equally but according to long-held *zhaizi* borders. .

In 1970 the subcounty administrative structure changed again. In Fuyuan, the previous nine

districts were turned into nine communes and the previous 138 communes into 138 brigades. However, the production teams, most of them *zhaizi*, remained unchanged. During yet another profound social change—the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1970)—the boundaries among teams/*zhaizi* that were set in 1962 were not altered. From 1970 to 1984, Guojiacaozi was a production team in Desheng Brigade, Fucun Commune. Pingdi and Huangnihe were in the new large Huangnihe Commune. Because of population growth, Pingdi now had three teams—the first, second, and third team of Pingdi. Huangnihe remained divided into three brigades, but each brigade now had five to six teams.

Implementing the Household Responsibility System in 1982—egalitarian land distribution within the boundaries of a zhaizi

The first major rural reform of the commune-brigade-team order, the Household Responsibility System (HRS), was implemented in the early 1980s. Both production and land management relationships among households and production teams changed dramatically in the wake of the HRS. Collectively owned agricultural land was allocated to individual households through contracts. Freed from the collective labor regime of previous decades, rural households reemerged as the primary units of agricultural production. My fieldwork reveals that in Fuyuan land allocation under the HRS generally took place within the borders of each *zhaizi*, although very large or small *zhaizi* tended to have more complicated methods to handle land allocation. For a large *zhaizi* such as Huangnihe, which had sixteen teams, or Pingdi, which had three teams, land allocation took place within each constituent team because cadres and villagers felt that a team was a manageable size for fair and efficient land allocation. For a team that was formed by several very small *zhaizi*, each constituent *zhaizi* formed a group within which

land allocation took place. These methods allowed the maintenance of *zhaizi* boundaries in the land distribution process.

As in the earlier land reform, egalitarianism and survival ethic were the major moral basis for land distribution under the HRS. Every person, *regardless of gender and age*, was eligible for an equal share of farmland, as long as this person lived in the community at the time of allocation, was defined as a team member, and was born in 1982 or earlier.²⁶ Because land resources differed among *zhaizi*, per capita farmland also differed from one *zhaizi* community to another. Every villager in Guojiacaozi received about 2 *mu* of land in the mountains. In Huangnihe each person received less than 1 *mu* of fertile valley land. Every member in the second team of Pingdi received 0.6 *mu* of rice paddy and 0.6 of dry land. In a *zhaizi* called Daaosi (大凹子) that is 2 miles away from Huangnihe, every member received 1 *mu* of dry land and 0.8 *mu* of rice paddy. With land now managed by every team/*zhaizi* household, *zhaizi* boundaries have been even more strictly maintained.

In 1984, a few years after the implementation of the HRS, the people's commune system was dismantled and a new rural administration, the township system (乡镇制), was established. Communes were replaced by townships, brigades by village committees, and production teams by villagers' groups. As before, most *zhaizi* retained their integrity and their land. Most small- to medium-sized teams/*zhaizi* were turned into villagers' groups. Production teams that had been formed within a *zhaizi* were generally dissolved. As a result, the number of *zhaizi* in Fuyuan is very close to that of villagers' groups. In 2004, there were 1,772 villagers' groups in Fuyuan. As of 2012, the number became 1,756. Given that there are 1,788 *zhaizi* in Fuyuan, we may say the recent administrative change has increased overlap between the *zhaizi* and the new basic administrative unit of the villagers' group.

Conclusion

This article has shown how socialist and post-socialist transformations in rural China, specifically in Yunnan province, have intertwined with complex cultural patterns and long-held traditions, resulting in multiple sources of enforceable norms and multilayered state-society relations. I have used the changing face of rural land ownership as an entry point to explore this question. I demonstrate that establishing the socialist land ownership system in rural southwest China involved dual processes.

On the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party launched a two-stage process of egalitarian redistributive land reform followed by collectivization of land and labor. During the collective era, all villagers were administratively bound to village collectives and were obligated to participate in collective labor. On the other hand, the state was not the only force determining the nature and parameters of rural land ownership, labor, and income distribution. While individual rural households' land rights were transferred to the collective, the second half of the twentieth century also witnessed the resilience of natural villages in maintaining their position in determining issues of land rights, status as resident, ritual, and identity. Using *zhaizi*, the natural villages in Fuyuan and other southwest rural areas, as an example, this article reveals that natural villages have maintained their social identities and physical boundaries in a socialist order through restricted community membership, visible landmarks such as ancestral graves and agricultural fields, and invisible elements such as lineage bonds and worship of territorial deities. Long-held cultural patterns and practices, however, are by no means static or fixed; they have interacted with broader historical processes to reinforce themselves and metamorphose in a context of rapid social change. As a result of the interaction between state-initiated land reform

and collectivization on the one hand, and the enduring identities of natural villages on the other, both land redistribution and collectivism took place within the borders of every natural village, placing limits on the egalitarian thrust of the era while embracing equal distribution among those recognized as community members. Facing such resilience and persistence, the state retreated from attempts to override the social and physical boundaries of these communities. It not only acknowledged natural villages' land rights but also incorporated these communities into its administrative and economic structure by making natural villages the basis for forming the most basic rural administrative and land-management units. With the majority of natural villages becoming the lowest-level collective land-management units (teams), the exclusivity of each traditional settlement community's land rights was institutionalized.

Furthermore, every natural village's control over its land had been strengthened by several decades of collectivization, during which team/natural village members labored on the same land and received remuneration based on the harvest of the land. Even for those communities whose land integrity was partially compromised at different times for management convenience or to achieve more egalitarian landholding among communities, relatively exclusive control over their remaining land was also restored through the 1962 Four Fixed policy. As few adjustments were made on the boundaries between teams/*zhaizi* from 1962 to the present, basically the same team/natural village constituents have managed the land for over half a century. The insularity and solidarity of each natural village has been reinforced as a result. For these reasons, I have coined the term "bounded collectivism" to describe such a unique landholding structure, which is not simply an economically costly and politically alienating system imposed by the socialist state from above, but a structure that has adapted to or

even strengthened key elements that have traditionally maintained the social and economic exclusivity of natural villages.

To conclude, I see four layers of meaning in the concept of "bounded collectivism:"

1. Collective ownership. This is a land property regime premised on replacing the previous private, unequal land ownership with public ownership with equal distribution of land rights within every natural village. Except for a brief period after land reform in the early 1950s, during which land was privately owned by rural households, formal ownership rights to rural land have been vested in three levels of rural collective from the 1950s to the present. Although rural households obtained land use rights through contracts under the Household Responsibility System in the early 1980s, rural land has remained collectively owned.
2. Egalitarianism. During the two major land distribution epochs in the People's Republic period—the land reform program in the early 1950s and the Household Responsibility System in the early 1980s—egalitarianism within every settlement community was the guiding principle for land allocation.²⁷ This principle has been supported both by the socialist ideology emphasizing equal social and economic rights among society members and by a long-held survival ethic at the grassroots level.
3. Boundedness. The tenacity with which natural villages have pursued control over their long-held physical and social boundaries during the People's Republic places specific limits on egalitarianism. Equal land allocation among villagers occurred *within* the natural village, not *among* natural villages. Throughout the

socialist period, these settlement communities maintained relatively exclusive control over land within their territories through mechanisms for defining community membership, distributing land only to community members, and defending their domains whenever a dispute occurs. This social and territorial exclusivity of natural villages has been acknowledged and institutionalized by the state in various ways, most important of which was to make the natural village the lowest-level collective land-management unit and the primary locus of labor organization and income distribution. With deep social and cultural roots in local communities, these units—whether the previous production teams or the current villagers’ groups—are not arbitrary territorial units, created for administrative convenience; rather, their control over land has made them fundamental, stable components of the rural political structure.

4. State domination. Although bounded collectivism resulted from a contestation between the socialist state and natural villages, power relations between the state and these communities have been unbalanced. The state has exerted strong control over essential rights associated with rural land ownership (including, at various times, use, transfer, and income rights), manifested mainly in its intervention in agricultural production (the 1950s to the early 1980s) and the land market (1950s to the present).²⁸ Due to strong state control, natural villages often have difficulty in engaging in major social and economic activities independently and predicated on their own interests. Nevertheless, what is most striking is the tenacity of local communities to assert rights, including land ownership rights within historically sanctioned borders of the *zhaizi*. As the

contestation continues, it remains to be seen how the parameters of bounded collectivism will change.

Understanding bounded collectivism is crucial to understanding contemporary rural Chinese society. It has profound implications for how the current two levels of village administration—the administrative village and its constituent villagers’ groups—share land rights, how differentiation between cadres at the two levels of village administration has given rise to complex political problems and defined the state-society nexus at the village level, and how the land market will evolve in future. These topics, and an assessment of differences in natural villages in North and South China, will be examined in a future article, “Implications of Bounded Collectivism in the Post-Mao Era.”

Recommended citation: Yi Wu, “Bounded Collectivism: Approaching Rural Land Rights and Labor Through “Natural Villages” in Southwest China,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue 31, No. 3, August 4, 2014.

About the Author

Yi Wu received her Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Columbia University in 2010 and is an independent scholar. This article draws on materials from her dissertation. A major part of the dissertation will appear in a forthcoming book, titled *Negotiating Rural Land Ownership in Southwest China: State Domination, Bounded Communities, and Family Farm Predicament* that is under contract with the University of Hawaii Press. The author looks forward to comments and feedback and can be reached at yw90@caa.columbia.edu.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to people in Fuyuan, who welcomed me into their lives and have provided invaluable assistance throughout my long-term research on China’s

rural land ownership.

I would like to thank my dissertation committee, consisting of Myron Cohen, Brinkley Messick, Laurel Kendall, Madeleine Zelin, and Benjamin Liebman, for their support and guidance. Throughout my Ph.D. studies, Myron Cohen provided me with consistent encouragement and unstinting support. His research on late imperial Chinese culture, especially his view on the instrumental role played by patrilineal lineages in maintaining restricted rural communities, helped me refine my central concept “bounded collectivism.” I am deeply indebted to Brinkley Messick who introduced me to the realm of property studies and legal anthropology and provided crucial theoretical and methodological guidance at every stage of my dissertation research.

Major funding for my dissertation project was provided by the Law and Social Science Program of the National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for the Anthropological Research.

My special thanks go to Mark Selden, a mentor and friend for almost two decades. This article benefited greatly from his academic rigor, his expertise on China’s socialist and post-socialist transformations, and his critical questions. More importantly, he helped broaden the concept of bounded collectivism by drawing my attention to the role played by rural settlement communities in organizing rural labor.

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Notes

¹ To the present, neither the Chinese government nor any other organization has conducted a systematic survey to confirm the precise number of “natural villages.” On January 11, 2014, Li Wei (李伟), the director of the Development Research Center of the State Council (国务院发展研究中心), estimated that there were 3.6 million natural villages in China in 2000 and that the number had decreased to 2.7 million in 2010 due to urbanization and consolidation over the past few decades. See [here](#). Another estimate is based on information from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (工业和信息化部), gathered from its project “Setting up Telephone Lines for Every Village” (村村通电话工程). In 2011, the ministry provided telephone service for 90,000 natural villages, thereby connecting an additional 4 percent of these communities with telephone service. By this estimation, there are currently more than 2 million natural villages in rural areas. Data [here](#).

² See Stephan Feuchtwang, “What Is a Village?” in *Cooperatives and Collective in China’s Rural Development: Between State and Private Interests*, ed. Eduard B. Vermeer, Frank N. Pieke, and Woei Lien Chong (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 46–74.

³ The word “natural” is used mainly to convey that these communities were formed simultaneously out of settlement choices over long historical periods. But the formation of these communities was of course shaped by many complex social, economic and administrative factors, which are not “natural” at all.

⁴ Very large *zhaizi* of several thousand people were often made into production brigades; their land was kept intact as well. See “The Making of Bounded Collectivism, 1952 to the Present” below for details.

⁵ See the next section, “The Making of Bounded Collectivism, 1952 to the Present,” for the

process of establishing a formal administrative structure in rural areas and incorporating *zhaizi* communities into this structure. The larger *zhaizi* became production brigades.

⁶ One *mu* equals 0.165 acre.

⁷ *Zhang* is a unit of length. One *zhang* equals 3.33 meters.

⁸ To protect the anonymity of my informants, I don’t identify the sources of land disputes discussed in this article.

⁹ *Fuyuan Xianzhi* [Fuyuan County Gazetteer] (1908–1985), 45.

¹⁰ Data from interviews with retired village cadres. Land redistribution was calculated in terms of individual entitlement but made to households and effectively held by households.

¹¹ The local term for “natural villages” in Hubei is *wanzi*.

¹² Interviews with elder village cadres in the current Desheng Administrative Village, April 2003.

¹³ See Qin and Su (1996), 65.

¹⁴ See Zhang 2002, 92–94.

¹⁵ *Fuyuan Xianzhi*, 116.

¹⁶ Interview with retired village cadres in Desheng Administrative Village, 2003.

¹⁷ The number of people who died during the Great Leap Forward remains controversial. See Frank Dikotter (2011) and Carl Riskin (1987).

¹⁸ Data from interview with retired village cadres in Huangnihe Administrative Village, 2004.

¹⁹ See “The Sixty Articles on the Work of the People’s Commune” in *The People’s Republic of China: A Documentary History of Revolutionary Change*, ed. Mark Selden (New York and

London: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 521-25.

²⁰ *Fuyuan Xianzhi*, 117.

²¹ Ownership as defined by the *Sixty Articles* needs to be treated with caution. Throughout the People's Republic, the state has always had strong control over the essential component rights of land ownership (such as use, income, and transfer rights), manifest in its intervention in agricultural production and control over the sale or permanent transfer of land. For this reason, I refer to the production team as the lowest-level land-management unit, although the *Sixty Articles* designate the team as a land-owning unit. I thank Mark Selden for encouraging me to think about the nature of the team's land ownership right and to clarify and refine my discussion of rights.

²² See Wang Jingxin (2001), 15-16.

²³ See "The Sixty Articles on the Work of the People's Commune" in *The People's Republic of China: A Documentary History of Revolutionary Change*, ed. Mark Selden (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 521-25.

²⁴ The number of *zhaizi* did not coincide with that of production teams because of the existence of very large and very small *zhaizi*. Very small *zhaizi* are scattered in deep mountains, several of which often formed a production team. A very large *zhaizi* with a population of several thousand typically formed a production brigade with several teams.

²⁵ Some *zhaizi* communities didn't record in documents the boundaries set up by the 1962 Four Fixed policy; some simply lost the

documents.

²⁶ Being born in the community was not necessarily a condition for being recognized as a team/*zhaizi* member. In addition, daughters and wives of community members who lived in the *zhaizi* at the time of land allocation received shares. However, wives who married into a *zhaizi* after 1982 were not given any land. Daughters who married out into another community left their shares of land to their natal families.

²⁷ It is important to note that land distribution at different stages resulted in different benefits: only the land reform of 1946-53 distributed land ownership rights to rural households; under the Household Responsibility System, farmers obtained land use rights only while land remained collectively owned.

²⁸ Although the central government relinquished direct control over agricultural production following implementation of the HRS in the early 1980s, some local governments at the natural village level have actively engaged in administering local agricultural production in order to increase revenue for themselves and boost local incomes. In southwest China, for example, compulsory tobacco production has been prevalent since the mid-1980s. Tobacco can generate high revenues through sale to a government monopoly. Local governments may also encourage or even force farmers to grow various kinds of cash crops that can boost incomes compared with subsistence crops of corn, wheat, or rice.