

Same Land, Different Life?

Questioning Narratives Surrounding China's State-Led Rural Urbanization

By Isabel Heger

“Same land, different life”: Under this slogan, Huaming, a model town in the suburban Dongli District of the municipality of Tianjin, China's fifth-largest city, was presented at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai as a successful example of China's rural urbanization. The slogan was meant to express that the peasants who had to give up their land in the process of urbanization and relocate to Huaming were leading better lives than before. This is in line with the official portrayal of government-engineered urbanization projects all across the country. However, Western journalism and most of academia are painting quite the opposite picture, commonly describing a deterioration of people's lives due to numerous problems.

As can be seen from the case of Huaming, there are contradictory narratives surrounding the consequences that China's state-led urbanization is supposed to have for landless peasants. A narrative essentially is a series of nonrandomly connected events that has been constructed to provide meaning—whether it appears in propaganda, the media, academic discourse, or personal life stories and everyday accounts. Thus, narratives play an important role for both world-making and self-making.¹

The goal of this article is to critically examine competing narratives surrounding China's state-led urbanization and put them in perspective by adopting a “view from below,” i.e., by including landless peasants' own stories in the equation. These findings not only allow us to more thoroughly discuss China's urbanization policy and its impact on the people, but also prompt us to more consciously reflect on our potential preconceptions.

In this article, I first provide an overview of the background and general discourses surrounding China's state-led rural urbanization. Then, Huaming is introduced as a case study that illustrates the construction of divergent narratives. Finally, I critically question these narratives by drawing on data from seven months of ethnographic fieldwork among Huaming's landless peasants.

Building a New Socialist Countryside: Background, Promises, and Problems

Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) launched its “Reform and Opening-Up” Policy in 1978, the country has urbanized at an unprecedented scale and pace. The decollectivization of agriculture, market-oriented reforms, and the loosening of restrictions on internal migration have caused millions of surplus rural workers (“migrant workers”) to come to cities in search of employment and better lives. At the same time, the economy has grown, and cities and towns have expanded rapidly into the surrounding countryside. However, as more and more agricultural land has been converted to urban construction land, and as many peasants don't pursue farming anymore, urban expansion has led to central government concerns over national food security.²

Against the backdrop of the unregulated encroachment of urbanization into rural areas on the one hand and “hollow villages” on the other hand, the national program of “building a new socialist countryside” was initiated in 2005. The policy framework provides the broad guidelines for a state-led transformation of China's rural areas. Through strategic urbanization and land consolidation, “building a new socialist countryside” aims to sustainably develop rural areas and increase land-use efficiency. Among other things, this includes relocating peasants to concentrated urban settlement areas and consolidating scattered village lands for commercial development, industrial purposes, and scaled-up agriculture. Amidst widespread urbanization of the countryside, quotas for the con-

version of farmland to construction land ensure that the total amount of arable land necessary for national grain security does not fall below the “red line” of 120 million hectares (463,323 square miles) set by the central government.³

As a result of China's push for rural urbanization, the demographic group of “landless peasants” has emerged. According to official estimates, the number of peasants whose land has been expropriated and who have been relocated will reach 110 million by the year 2030. Based on my own research, the group of landless peasants is defined by one main characteristic: its members had to give up their land to fulfill government policy goals—whether or not they were willing to move and whether or not they were still working in agriculture at the time of relocation. The role of land is crucial: under China's persistent rural-urban divide, land provides security for people born with rural residency status (*hukou*) in much the same way that social welfare provides security for urban residents. Thus, what distinguishes landless peasants from migrant workers—peasants who leave behind their land to find urban employment—is that they don't have the safety net of returning to their fields.

Jingzhong Ye, Professor of Development Studies at China Agricultural University, points out that peasants' livelihoods have been secondary to resolving issues of land and agriculture throughout the history of the PRC.⁴ Still, peasants' well-being is an important concern in “building a new socialist countryside.” In the official government narrative around the policy framework, expropriating peasants and relocating them to concentrated residential areas is not only deemed necessary for increasing land-use efficiency; the government presents the policy as a remedy for a range of “rural problems” related to the quality of the countryside and the *suzhi* (human quality) of the peasantry, which still lag behind their urban counterparts. For example, concentrating peasants in urban settlements should improve access to education and health care facilities, as well as amenities like sanitation and running water. Regarding the relocated peasants themselves, the program promotes the overall improvement of economic and living conditions, guarantees a sustainable livelihood, and essentially depicts the move toward a better life. Thus, state-led urbanization advocates regard the policy as a “civilizing” project promising to close China's rural-urban gap.⁵

If these promises sound too good to be true, it is because they often are. Practice has shown that China's efforts to transform the countryside have caused a number of problems for former peasants. Some scholars, such as Lynette H. Ong, political scientist and China specialist at the University of Toronto, use the term “coercive urbanization” to describe the situation: peasants are often forced into giving up their land-use rights and only receive inadequate compensation for their losses. Meanwhile, it is widely known that corrupt local government officials make handsome profits during the process of land transfer. In the urban environment, many peasants have trouble finding employment, and the cost of living is higher compared to the countryside. Losing the land, which had for centuries provided peasants with security, can become a problem if rural residents are insufficiently integrated into the urban social welfare system—for example, by becoming urban residents on paper without equal access to urban welfare. Furthermore, village communities are often torn apart, and some former peasants face difficulties adapting to their new environments. All this has caused social unrest and tensions between the people and the state.⁶

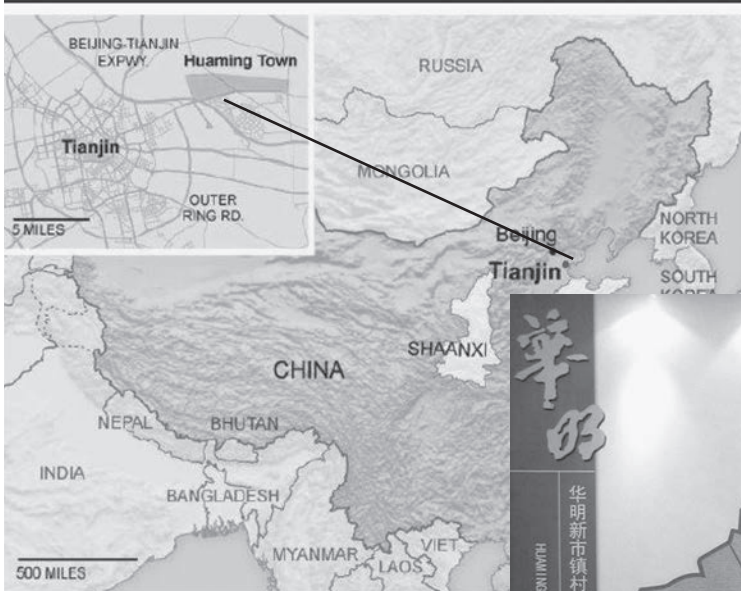


Figure 1: Map of China with inset of Tianjin and location of Huaming. Source *Affordable Housing Institute* blog at <https://tinyurl.com/ydapogut>.

Huaming Model Town: Utopia or Dystopia?

Huaming (see Figure 1) is a suitable case for analyzing narratives of rural urbanization because of the attention it received within China and abroad during the 2010 World Expo. However, apart from its model status, Huaming is far from unique. Rather, it is one of countless examples of how “building a new socialist countryside” has been implemented in practice. As David Bray, senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Sydney, reports, thousands of similar projects have emerged throughout rural China in recent years. In fact, every administrative village in China has been required to commission a twenty-year “master plan” for redevelopment.⁷

Huaming was China’s first national implementation site for the land consolidation method “exchanging homestead for house.” Starting around 2006, peasants from twelve villages, almost 60,000 people, had to relinquish their land and rural homesteads, and were subsequently relocated to the newly built town (see Figure 2). All households were compensated for the loss of their rural dwellings with apartments in Huaming, with a baseline of thirty square meters per capita. The reactions of the relocated peasants I interviewed varied depending upon individual subjective estimates of gains and losses compared to their former locales. Furthermore, peasants were compensated for the loss of the land as a source of income and security with a monetary lump sum of 100,000 RMB per capita, about \$15,000 USD. My informants considered this sum inadequate given the actual value of the land and the increased living expenses in an urban environment. Also, former peasants were converted to urban citizenship status, meaning they were integrated into Tianjin’s basic urban social security system, which includes minimum subsistence allowance, basic health insurance, and basic pensions for the elderly. The problem of qualifying peasants for urban employment was supposed to be solved through re-training programs, about which none of the people with whom I talked were familiar.⁸

Urban planners have created a functional living environment in Huaming. Most of the town consists of neighborhood compounds for the resettled villagers, where people from the same village often still live in close proximity to each other. There is a big park and lots of communal space;

According to official estimates, the number of peasants whose land has been expropriated and who have been relocated will reach 110 million by the year 2030.



Figure 2: Display map showing the twelve villages that people were relocated from to the new centrally located town of Huaming. Source: From Huaming’s management committee conference center. Photo courtesy of the author.

facilities such as a hospital and schools (including a middle school); space for commercial development like malls, restaurants, and karaoke bars; and convenient infrastructure. Adjacent, there is an industrial park and a growing sector of commercial housing with urban middle-class standards. About ten years after relocation, a new normal has settled in, and Huaming’s landless peasants have, for better or for worse, adapted to their changed circumstances.

In 2010, Huaming was presented at the World Expo in Shanghai as an example of successful rural urbanization. The Huaming pavilion was located in the expo’s “urban best practices area,” which displayed innovative solutions to problems related to urbanization and urban living. Fitting the expo’s overarching theme “better city, better life,” the slogan “same land, different life” was chosen for Huaming, and a whole narrative has been constructed around the town. Huaming was built on the same land that had once belonged to the villagers. The slogan’s intended meaning is that on this same land, the relocated peasants are now leading better lives than before. This narrative has been propagated throughout the model town’s existence, but especially in the time surrounding the expo, when it provided a red thread for the expo pavilion and all related media coverage.

The official narrative juxtaposes life in the former villages with life in Huaming. Village life is depicted as dirty, backward, and disorderly, Huaming is portrayed as the fulfillment of villagers’ long-held dreams of a good life and urban planners’ visions for good city living. The lives of Huaming’s residents are described as having drastically improved, with some former peasants even becoming rich overnight due to the generous compensations.⁹ The corresponding imagery is clear: for example, right behind the pavilion’s entrance is an archway bearing the slogan “same land, different



Figure 3: "Wall of smiling faces." Slideshow right behind the entryway of Huaming's expo pavilion, visualizing the official narrative of the model town. Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

life," which offers a view of the "wall of smiling faces" (see Figure 3). On it, you can see a slideshow of smiling former rural dwellers, where, upon closer inspection, each image consists of thousands of tiny smiling faces.

In contrast, Western (and overseas Chinese) investigative journalism has painted a truly dystopic image of the model town. Here, the narrative has been reversed: what was presented as a project benefiting the people has turned out to be a scam, and the former peasants are now living under precarious conditions. A newspaper clipping from an article in *The New York Times* (see Figure 4) gives an impression of the gloomy tenor in which the situation in Huaming is described.

Regardless of subjective evaluations of urbanization, the Chinese government's actions have had profound consequences—both positive and negative—for the relocated population.

Besides unemployment, disrupted community structures, and frequent suicides, the article also includes descriptions of the use of extreme coercion by local government, instances of corruption, poor building quality, fertile land supposed to be consolidated for important purposes now laying bare, major discontent, and a general feeling of despair among the people.¹⁰

As one should expect, the official Chinese narrative has painted an entirely positive image of Huaming, leaving out any flaws. It is surprising, though, that Western journalism has painted an equally biased, entirely negative image, neglecting anything positive about the model town.

A more differentiated picture is only painted by some Chinese studies: the authors stress the model town's overall accomplishments, but in order to provide suggestions for policy improvement, they have been able

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/17Ljhwh>

ASIA PACIFIC | LEAVING THE LAND

New China Cities: Shoddy Homes, Broken Hope

By IAN JOHNSON NOV. 9, 2013

HUAMING, China — Three years ago, the Shanghai World Expo featured this newly built town as a model for how China would move from being a land of farms to a land of cities. In a dazzling pavilion visited by more than a million people, visitors learned how farmers were being given a new life through a fair-and-square deal that did not cost them anything.

Today, Huaming may be an example of another transformation: the ghettoization of China's new towns.

Signs of social dysfunction abound. Young people, who while away their days in Internet cafes or pool halls, say that only a small fraction of them have jobs. The elderly are forced to take menial work to make ends meet. Neighborhood and family structures have been damaged.

Most worrying are the suicides, which local residents say have become an all-too-familiar sign of despair.

Figure 4: Newspaper clipping illustrating the tenor of the Western narrative about Huaming. Source: *The New York Times* at <http://nyti.ms/17Ljhwh>.

to point out some important issues (for example, rights violations in the process of relocation, as well as people's difficulties in earning a livelihood). However, these studies only provide a general, top-down view of the situation in Huaming, which leaves open the question of how the model town's residents themselves evaluate urbanization. Against this backdrop, the following analysis gives a glimpse into people's own narratives.

"Same Land, Different Life": Three Interpretations Based on Landless Peasants' Own Narratives

The data for this study stems from two stages of ethnographic fieldwork in Huaming. My research followed a Grounded Theory design¹¹ with a combination of participant observation and semi-narrative interviews. The initial phase of fieldwork, from October to November 2016, allowed me to gain an unbiased understanding of the field, establish many contacts, and most importantly build trust to lay the foundations for a longer research stay. The second time, I lived among the locals for half a year (from September 2017 to February 2018), continuing to do participant observation and conducting twenty-five semi-narrative interviews, mostly with informants with whom I had established closer relationships. Since people knew I was not affiliated with the government and that I would protect their privacy, they talked to me very openly.

In the course of my fieldwork, I realized that Huaming's landless peasants share no uniform urbanization experience. Consequently, there are no uniform narratives about urbanization. Breaking down my informants' narratives in a simplified manner, the model town's slogan "same land, different life" can be interpreted in three ways.

(1) Different = Better

During my fieldwork, I was surprised to find that there actually are people whose own experiences and opinions correspond to Huaming's official narrative. For these people, moving to Huaming, in one way or the other, was the fulfillment of a dream, and they only speak positively about lifestyle changes.

One example is a forty-year-old woman, known to everyone as "Second Sister,"¹² who runs a small family restaurant that she opened when she was still living in the countryside. She is the only one who, during our interview, actually brought up the slogan "same land, different life" in its intended meaning. Narrating her life for me, she told me how she had been eager to move to Huaming from the moment the project was first announced. Impatiently waiting for her family's turn to relocate, she envied

people who had been allotted earlier moving dates. Talking about herself, Second Sister recounted how she had always loved cleanliness and order, which for her was embodied in urban living. She is completely satisfied with how life in Huaming has turned out and especially loves the beautiful landscaping.

Another example is Mr. and Mrs. Ai, a retired couple who had always been among the poorest peasants, tilling the land for almost nothing in return. Even though they had not dreamed of urban living before, the move to Huaming eventually provided them with an escape from life on the poverty line.

(2) Different = Worse

In contrast to the above, I also encountered some people who hold a very negative image of Huaming, similar to the one painted by investigative journalism. Interestingly, some of the people with the most critical views on Huaming are not necessarily among those who are currently in the worst circumstances. Rather, independently of their own situations, they are concerned for the livelihoods of others and the greater good of social justice.

An example is forty-two-year-old Mr. Ge, who keeps a wary eye on the town's development. Although he is leading a quite comfortable life in Huaming—he runs his own small construction business with which he is able to provide well for his family—the experience of coercion upon relocation is still ingrained in his mind, and he sees other people struggling to make a living on a daily basis. Before our interview, he drove me around the edges of town to point out all its flaws: in a nutshell, the villagers were forced to cede their land, which corrupt officials had then sold to developers for a multiple of what people had received as compensation. Much of this land was still laying bare before the former peasants' eyes, while many were struggling to make ends meet. According to Mr. Ge, the whole town is a lie and a bubble. In his opinion, nothing was done right, and malpractices came at the expense of people's livelihoods.

(3) Different = Different

The majority of people I came across, however, acknowledge the positive and the negative sides of having been urbanized. For them, life is not necessarily better or worse than before, just different. To give one example: When I first introduced myself to seventy-three-year-old Laoda and told him I was researching Huaming's urbanization, he nodded knowingly and started telling me his thoughts—there were advantages as well as disadvantages. For rhetorical purposes, he asked, "What are the disadvantages?" and answered right away, "We don't have land anymore. What are peasants without land supposed to do? How are they supposed to spend their days?" This refers not only to difficulties in finding employment for the working-age population, but also to the loss of purpose many old peasants are experiencing. Laoda himself, although already retired, has found varying occupations time and again because he says it keeps him fit mentally and physically. Currently, he works as a cleaner for a local company. After a pause, Laoda posed the same rhetorical question about the advantages of being relocated to Huaming. According to him, everyone now owns an apartment, even poor peasants who didn't own property before. Also, old people receive a monthly pension, and there is some health insurance—benefits they did not enjoy as rural residents.

Many more examples could be given, but these few suffice to show how landless peasants' own narratives put into perspective the big narratives *about* them. However, one question remains: why are there such big discrepancies in people's experiences and narratives regarding urbanization? The answer is simple: experiences and narratives differ because landless peasants are not a homogeneous demographic group, even though they are almost always depicted as such. Rather, people of different socioeconomic circumstances, with different life trajectories, dreams, and ideas of a good life, all fall under this classification. Depending on the individual and a range of factors pertaining to his or her personal situation, urbanization has impacted life in different ways, and narratives diverge accordingly.



Figure 5: A man contemplates the slogan "same land, different life" on the boulder at the entrance of Huaming's wetlands park while another man drives by. Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

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Conclusion

Ethnographic fieldwork among Huaming's landless peasants revealed that there are indeed people who corroborate the dominant narratives—both good and bad—about the model town. However, and more importantly, it revealed that there is a large gray area in between that most accurately reflects most people's opinions—i.e., while life in the new environment certainly is different than before, urbanization has brought about both positive and negative consequences. Furthermore, my findings highlight that, contrary to popular belief, landless peasants are not a homogeneous social group, which explains the substantial differences in people's experiences and narratives.

These results are a first step toward closing the research gaps regarding our understanding of the role of urbanization for China's landless peasants. However, they merit a further discussion with regard to the wider context of China's state-led urbanization on the one hand and the narrative construction of reality on the other hand.

Regardless of subjective evaluations of urbanization, the Chinese government's actions have had profound consequences—both positive and negative—for the relocated population. This first of all raises the question of legitimacy: is it legitimate for the state to expropriate peasants and deprive them of the land that had for centuries sustained them? The answer is legally yes: under the PRC's system of land ownership, the government does have the right to lawfully requisition land "in the public interest." Although Western governments also have eminent domain authority to expropriate land for the public good with appropriate compensation, it is important for students to understand that policy implementation is much more controversial in the West because of different traditions regarding ownership and individual property rights that are not, for the most part, factors in Chinese history. In China, the general legitimacy of the state to expropriate land is not questioned, although people frequently criticize and demonstrate against unlawful implementation on lower levels of the state's hierarchy.¹³ A second important question, although outside the scope of this article, asks

In China, the general legitimacy of the state to expropriate land is not questioned, although people frequently criticize and demonstrate against unlawful implementation on lower levels of the state's hierarchy.

what responsibilities the Chinese government should assume toward relocated people.

Under the premise of the legitimacy of the government's actions, a third question arises: diverse reactions notwithstanding, is Huaming's relocated population better off than before? This is a question that cannot easily be answered. In material terms, it is possible to argue that the land the peasants lost probably held more value than the lump sum of 100,000 RMB per capita and the state welfare they are now entitled to or that the apartment a household received as compensation is worth less (or maybe more) than the former homestead. On a subjective level that includes personal feelings or values that determine happiness, or the lack thereof, objective judgments are difficult, or impossible, to make.

Undeniably, Huaming has seen many instances of local government malpractice and still faces many problems. But in contrast to municipal and local officials' even more severe neglect of rural people in other relocation projects, such as those described by Ong,¹⁴ Huaming's landless peasants have been relatively better compensated, and at least their basic subsistence is guaranteed. Perhaps Huaming's residents fared better because of self-created government incentives incurred by naming Huaming a "model town."

Finally, we should once more consider the dominant narratives about Huaming in their own right. Narratives are a powerful tool of constructing reality, either purposefully (as is certainly the case in Chinese state media and propaganda) or unconsciously (as might be the case in Western reporting). The predictable utopian official image of Huaming prevails within China, while the dystopic image of the model town (or state-led relocation projects in general) prevails in the West. Major reasons for these contrasting narratives can be ideological, historical, cultural, and even market-determined (e.g., what kind of news sells?).¹⁵ Besides these factors, our own presuppositions also play a role for perpetuating the dominant narratives. For example, when journalists go into the field with a bias they are not aware of, or with a certain story in mind they know will appeal to their readership, they are especially sensitized to picking up on specific sentiments and opinions among the people, and may unconsciously disregard other voices.

In conclusion, when learning and thinking about policy outcomes in an authoritarian government like the PRC that has the power to create an official narrative, it is especially important not to unquestioningly accept that narrative. By the same token, however, we should also not unquestioningly accept the narratives constructed by Western sources. Furthermore, it is equally as important to question our own presuppositions when engaging with a topic. All this might require looking at a subject from a worm's-eye view,¹⁶ which means taking into account the lived experiences and narratives of the people themselves. ■

NOTES

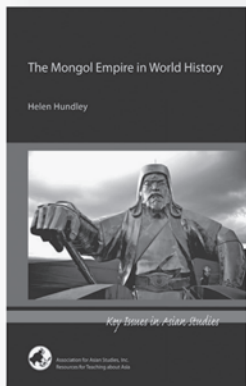
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