

Journal of Research Practice
Volume 10, Issue 2, Article N15, 2014



Research Note:

Building Solidarity in International Development Research and Practice

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Index Terms: agrarian change; eco-city; eviction; human geography; industrial ecology; international development; political ecology; politics of location

Suggested Citation: Chen, J.-C. (2014). Building solidarity in international development research and practice [Research note]. *Journal of Research Practice*, 10(2), Article N15. Retrieved from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/404/367>

Note. This research note is part of the thematic section, Giving Back in Solidarity, in the special issue titled “Giving Back in Field Research,” published as Volume 10, Issue 2 in the *Journal of Research Practice*.

As a graduate student in city and regional planning, a field that has an explicit (and fraught) orientation toward practice and ideas of “improvement,” I entered my studies with an activist’s mentality acquired from years of social movement work. I endeavored to conduct research that is engaged in a process of social change rather than simply “giving back.” Notions of giving back have existed for decades in collaborative and advocacy planning. However, many practitioners and scholars continue to be critical of the ongoing inequalities in power that are reflected in these paradigms and their incorporation into the foundations of the planning disciplines. Building on the critical perspectives of political ecology, my research employs ethnography to examine, from the ground up, how social-environmental injustice is embedded within the best-intentioned planning ideas and practices. It is my belief that the potentially disastrous shortcomings of these ideas and practices can never be overcome through forms of giving back that are not themselves integrated into work for building grassroots organization, solidarity, and accountability to communities. In this short piece, I reflect on these difficulties.

As I began fieldwork in China to study projects of master planned green development that combine the construction of new “eco-cities” with transnational “green industries” as their economic engines, the longstanding critiques of modernist planning were clearly relevant (e.g., Holston, 1989; Scott, 1998). In the villages that I researched between 2007 and 2012, tens of thousands of people were being dispossessed of their homes, communities, land, livelihoods, and savings as the global green economy unfolded across the countryside. It is easy to excoriate any top-down utopian vision that requires such massive transformation without any forms of sanctioned recourse. However, finding a way to engage productively as a scholar of international development planning is more of a fraught proposition. While my multi-sited approach included ethnography of planners and government officials, this essay focuses on my interactions with villagers and how that has shaped my ongoing work to build solidarity outside the scope of my dissertation project.

Seeking to refashion the institutional scaffolding of academia, Bourdieu (1990) asserts the role of the activist-scholar in helping to make social inequalities visible, while also being “a scholar inside the machine.” In the beginning, I followed a similar tack, and concentrated on revealing the assumptions of green development and seeking out villagers’ countervailing knowledge of social-environmental transformation. However, having constructed the research object of “green development in China,” I found that I had to face my “scholastic point of view” (Bourdieu, 1990): that the villagers whom I interpreted as the victims of this transnational green juggernaut saw things rather differently. This led me to be more sensitive to politics at the village level that did not inform my initial questions about perceptions and contestations of green development.

The villagers did not know any specifics of the projects that necessitated their displacement. This was due in part to asymmetries in access to information. For example, residents who were being evicted in early 2010 were not even aware that their villages and a swath of over 20 square-kilometers of the surrounding area had been annexed to build a new eco-city project under the authority of the adjacent economic development zone. The immediate political justifications for displacement were frequently related to infrastructure construction, and were primarily relayed by cadre at the village level and by the staff of the demolition and eviction company. Both of these provided local officials with a political buffer. As displacement unfolded, the villages were reorganized under new boundaries of “administrative village” authorities, under cadre that they had never met. This process dismantled existing village political structures and severed residents from previous channels for seeking political accountability. Although administratively a dispatched unit of the local government, the demolition and eviction company had a narrow scope of work in carrying out eviction notification and physically dismantling the village. This meant that the demolition company staff and workers did not have information about the larger scope of planned transformation. This effectively limited their exchange with villagers to the immediate implementation processes within their purview.

The information gap was also due to high rates of illiteracy and underdevelopment despite decades of mobilization for socialist transformation. Although some information

circulated in party-sanctioned press like the local edition of the *People's Daily*, villagers were often misinformed by rumors that distorted perceptions of the purpose behind their imminent evictions. In one village that was undergoing eviction for the eco-city project, residents believed that their village would be the new site of the municipal government seat. I could not confirm the origin of the rumor, but it had the effect of giving villagers a conflicted sense of pride and a notion that their displacement was deemed necessary to a larger civic identity. Yet, when I asked about the increasingly pervasive billboards, banners and propaganda extolling the green development projects, one villager commented: "No one reads those. Except, perhaps, for the cadres." The sarcasm in the latter comment expressed a deep cynicism, and related to what others discussed as a forced acquiescence to this latest iteration of top-down rural transformation: "We ordinary folk do not have any say. They say leave and we go. They say stay and we stay. It does not matter if we are poor or already old or do not have a place to go or work." Moreover, these statements demonstrated that the local authorities were not directing these propaganda at legitimating the projects to those most directly impacted by them.

To many villagers, the justifications no longer mattered. Rather, upholding legal rights and procedural justice within the context of dispossession became the most salient aspects of politics for them. Were the proper procedures of notification, compensation, and eviction followed? If not, papers would not be signed; "nail households" would drive themselves in, barring their doors in confrontations with demolition company workers and village cadres. I came to understand that these proscribed politics indicated a tacit structural critique that posited specific spaces for counter-political legitimacy and struggle. In my own political judgment, the salient question was whether I could support procedural justice claims as a political fissure in a moment of simultaneous critique and compliance. Was there an ethical manner in which I could help contestation over enclosure and displacement expand into a broader political struggle for villager self-determination, deepening of community culture, and re-appropriation of the terms of social-environmental change?

It became apparent that my immediate contributions toward such goals would be constrained by my status as a foreign national, and moreover as an unknown quantity in the midst of turbulent change. Villagers almost all initially assumed that I was a journalist, there to tell stories of a disappearing way of life or to glean statements of support for resettlement into the modern concrete midrise buildings that were sprouting in seemingly endless Corbusian rows on the fringes of the city. A few others asked if I worked for the demolition company and suspected that I was there to inquire about their progress toward vacating their homes or to demand signed notification documents. Villagers' initial wariness of me was partially rooted in fear of repression. There is overall a general tolerance of dissent as long as it does not cross into discussion of collective action. One can curse the local government and village cadre as corrupt, but one cannot say: "We should all bar our doors and block the bulldozers." One cannot go to support a nail household digging in to resist eviction—especially in another neighboring village. When I showed concern over the evictions, a few people thought I was from the central government on an oversight mission, and perhaps there to defend the villagers' interests against unjust actions on the part of the local authorities. Even in high-profile

cases of opposition to dispossession, higher levels of the government rarely intervene. These misrecognitions were telling. They revealed a hope that someone might be able to change the immediate situation, that there was some way to avert displacement; but also that collective action seemed out of the question.

I found that questions of procedural justice emerged directly from violations of villagers' constitutional rights to adequate notification and compensation. In the hope that information could help villagers to organize and, at the very least, to better prepare for displacement, I began to show and explain public—but uncirculated—information regarding project plans and their political and economic justifications. Together, we discussed differences in how the legal framework and rights for displacement and compensation were being represented by local officials, the demolition company, and in local precedents and online resources that I researched. In the absence of grassroots mobilization, I believed that open discussion of the contradictions of the purported goals of the projects and the injustice of the processes of implementation could potentially broaden the confined politics of individual household disputes into opportunities for solidarity. This optimism was further exceeded by my hope that efforts by scholar-activists under the banner of New Rural Reconstruction, which have transformed national discourse on rural development and inequality since the late 1990s, could become an organizational and aspirational touchstone for villagers as they struggled to maintain not only their livelihoods, but also their community ties and way of life.

However, my actions were very limited. Local officials must approve work by foreign researchers, and the head of the demolition company questioned my right to be in the village. He had his foreman attempt to bar my access to the villages they were working in under the pretense that as “construction zones” they were no longer publicly accessible spaces, and that my approval by local officials was no longer valid. I returned with an officially stamped survey instrument to record transitions in energy use between the villages and relocation housing. After a few hours talking to villagers, I returned to find my motorcycle upside down in a ditch with the gas cap removed. On another day, in response to my photographing the demolition process, the foreman had two men sledgehammer down a wall near me. It was clear that I could not actually attempt to organize villagers or even encourage them beyond providing information. My right to do this was itself challenged when the head of the demolition company attempted to confiscate a book of plans that I had brought to a village, saying that it was not mine to carry. These encounters with street-level bureaucracy underlined a political function of the administrative hierarchy. Immediate threats could easily make the larger picture and the official decisions behind it appear distant and obscure.

Despite facing massive uncertainties and near complete transformations of their social worlds, I was never once asked for any form of material aid. In fact, when I would bring tea or cookies to share with those who invited me into their homes, people would make a sincere effort to politely refuse these tiny gestures. In the same, they would insist that I share fresh vegetables from their gardens and eat at their tables. These gestures of hospitality highlighted that I was a guest, and that despite upheaval, the village was still a home. The requests for help I did receive were beyond my ability and position to fulfill.

In the fall of 2010, as demolition for the eco-city sped up, a few households asked me if I would be able to appeal to higher authorities to delay the eviction schedule by 2 or 3 weeks so that the villagers could take in their last harvest of rice. Although I had contact with the leadership committee of the zone, my permission to be there was defined under narrow purposes. Moreover, I found that this was standard procedure and that some people actually stood to gain from the scheduling. The administrative village cadre had already made plans to contract the harvest out, and some villagers believed this certainly entailed a kickback. The difficulty of traveling back to the fields from wherever people lived in temporary housing meant that the poorest households were forced to exchange a large portion of their crops for the harvesting service and two or three large bags of hulled rice. Though I could not have an impact on eviction scheduling, I tried to offer help with the labor of harvesting for households who were nearer by or were among the few still in the village when harvest time came. My help was not accepted. Even though I tried to convince them on the grounds that it would benefit my research experience, one family told me it would simply be too uncomfortable for them to have me working in the field and laughed that it would probably end up taking more time in the end. These experiences of failure to be of immediate help were dejecting and emphasized the need for me to find a way to support a broader collective form of response.

Returning day after day, villagers' mistrust and suspicions of my motives gave way. Brief conversations became shared meals and shared work. I learned to pick squash, sort beans, and husk sesame. Even the demolition foreman, a local, became sympathetic and smiled when the multiple households of the Jiang family told him that I was their nephew. Fear of questions and being linked to dissent faded to a desire for stories to be understood, recorded, photographed, and shared as a process of remembering and coping with the transformations underway. I brought planning documents and we analyzed these together alongside papers from eviction and resettlement processes. Some expressed that they could not understand how a "student" would have the means and position to travel to far off place to talk to people about their lives. Others continued to wonder why they had not seen my reporting in the newspapers or on CCTV. In the conversations about the changes to their lives, these questions about my position underscored a desire to be heard.

As time went on, my "informants" sought to be "collaborators" (this distinction is informed by the writings of Whyte [1993] and others). This meant two things. First, the people I met became eager to tell me the stories of their immediate struggles and hardships. Second, they wanted to understand my view of the changes. We dialogued about my confusions and interpretations. In these discussions, villagers also wanted to understand why I was there and how that shaped what I saw. I took these questions as a challenge to examine what Adrienne Rich (1984) called the "politics of location" and "a struggle for accountability . . . against lofty and privileged abstraction. . . . Abstractions severed from the doings of living people, fed back to people as slogans." The context of Rich's provocation was a move from a broad politics of identity to one that is accountable for how we shape and are shaped by the places and times we find ourselves in.

In my collaborative exchanges with villagers, I knew that my efforts to give back would have to extend much further in time and space in order to have any hope of being

realized. Yet, I also recognize that my efforts may never give back directly to those that have contributed to my research. Here, I have drawn on my experience as an organizer and campaigner to inform how I can think about my commitment and accountability to the communities I worked with. This has meant that the topics I identified as important for continued research were informed by my ethnographic research collaborators; that they had a say in how I would represent them, and that they became invested in their stories being told in the context of green development. As my collaborators began to understand the explicit ways that green development ideology justified dispossession, they demonstrated how these ideas and physical transformations underpinned villagers' incorporation into modernized lifestyles. They recounted how as villages were divided for phased demolition, they had been renamed and incorporated into new administrative entities. They made sure that I understood the importance of their livelihoods and environmental practices. They showed me how, with virtually no waste, they fertilized their fields with compost, fed their animals with scraps, and managed water for irrigation, aquaculture, and orchards. They contested the ideas and temporalities of a global green economy that accounts for progress through means that obscured their losses. For me, this process of distinguishing their social world recalls Linda Tuwihai Smith's (1999) reconstruction of Freirean "naming" as critical to constructing meaning in a process of political struggle. It also highlighted the importance of dialog in building a collaborative insight that village displacement was the enabling precondition of new "ecological" agribusinesses and solar panel factories employing migrant laborers.

My evolving approach to fieldwork takes inspiration from the research tradition of political ecology, engaging topics of environmental change with political economy, raising questions of inequality, and examining articulations of power. The tradition's implied politics, ethical norms, and efforts at self-reflexive writing and research are among the most clearly articulated in relationship to the problems that I encountered. However, researchers' politics of location and extended engagements are often under-articulated in the artifacts of the research monograph or journal article. Rarely is an ongoing engagement between the researcher's ethics and politics and the research program explicitly discussed and brought into the arena of methodology. In nascent efforts, I have sought to extend my research praxis into networks that will build my accountability to the communities where I conduct my research, reshaping my everyday practices and informing its ethics. I have come to realize that in this most basic sense, a research program driven by the desire to make change through giving back cannot succeed without the direct and explicit partnership of those who would otherwise be constructed as objects of inquiry and knowledge production within a research episteme. Giving back should be based on a model of solidarity and movement building, not charity.

In this endeavor, my post-fieldwork efforts have included engagement with the field of industrial ecology. In this realm, I look for the things that are not accounted for in models of eco-industry building for renewable energy in China and for global markets. I am building partnerships with NGOs addressing these contradictions in the "green economy" and their own political dilemmas of "fundamentalism" (e.g., opposing solar as a viable alternative to fossil fuels) versus "realism" (i.e., accepting the status quo of political

repression and market exploitation in the name of a greener future). To date, the state-repressive obstacles to grassroots organization in China have inhibited the engagement of transnational solidarity movements and organizations like La Via Campesina. I am in the beginning stages of working with other researchers and organizations to partner with Chinese counterparts who have mobilized in the wakes of several “green industry” pollution cases. We seek to begin a long process of building accountability and solidarity by helping to bridge the aspirations of villagers and the Chinese movement for rural reconstruction with global social movements proposing alternatives to market-driven green industries.

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Received 24 October 2013 | Accepted 17 March 2014 | Published 1 July 2014

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