

Research Report

Subduing “The Rural House-building Craze”: Attitudes Towards Housing Construction and Land Use Controls in Four Zhejiang Villages*

Sally Sargeson

ABSTRACT Why do villagers in China’s most densely populated and productive agricultural regions use scarce farmland to construct housing? And why has the Chinese government, which has legislated to conserve arable land so as to ensure national food security, been unable to control housing construction in the countryside? Previous studies of the factors motivating the rural housing boom tend to explain this either as a reaction against insecure property rights in land and a speculative response to emergent market opportunities, or as a social mobility tactic. This paper presents interview and survey data from four villages in Zhejiang province that show that property rights in land do not affect villagers’ housing construction and market incentives play only a minor role in propelling house-building. The social and demographic aspirations of families and the reconfiguration of rural households’ economic activities are major stimuli of “the rural house-building craze.”

The unprecedented loss of arable land, and its implications for national food security, has long been of concern to the Chinese government. Throughout the 1980s, the government devised a range of policies to protect farmland and increase investment in agriculture. A national Land Administration Law, promulgated in 1986, was intended to prevent the conversion of arable land to non-agricultural uses.¹ Yet statisticians calculate that between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, more than 200,000 ha of arable land was lost annually, destroying some 6 per cent of the country’s total cultivated area.² Despite a 1997 ban on the use of farmland for non-agricultural purposes, a national census revealed that the rate of destruction increased towards the end of the decade. In 1998,

* Research was funded by an Australia Research Council Small Grant, Pacific Cultural Foundation Grant SC8105 and the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University. Field research could not have been conducted without the support, advice and assistance of Professor Jia Shenghua of Zhejiang University and Dr Zhang Hongbin of Zhongshan University, to whom I am immensely grateful.

1. Priscilla M. F. Leung, “Land law,” in Wang Chenguang and Zhang Xianchu (eds.), *Introduction to Chinese Law* (Hong Kong: Sweet and Maxwell, 1997), pp. 541–566; *Guotu ziyuan bao* (*National Land Resources Daily*), 12 November 1999; Ronald G. Knapp, “Rural housing and village transformation in Taiwan and Fujian,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 147 (1996), p. 783.

2. *Beijing Review*, 9 November 1998, p. 16; Wang Xiyu, “Zai jiating jingying jichu shang shenhua nongdi zhidu gaige: guanyu jianli shiying shichang jingji de nongdi zhidu de sikao” (“Deepening reform of the land system on the basis of household management; reflections on establishing a land system appropriate to the market economy”), *Zhongguo nongcun jingji* (*China’s Rural Economy*), No. 1 (1999), pp. 4–8.

the total area of farmland declined by 335,000 ha.³ A further 430,000 ha was lost in 1999.⁴

The destruction of farmland primarily was caused by desertification, agricultural restructuring, industrial and infrastructural development, and what became known as “the rural house-building craze.”⁵ Estimates vary, but it is generally accepted that village housing accounted for about 5 to 6 per cent of the total area forfeited.⁶ The area lost to new housing was greatest in the central eastern provinces – traditionally a highly productive agricultural region.⁷ For example in Zhejiang, the province that is the focus of this report, new housing consumed more than 8 per cent of the farmland ruined.⁸

Notwithstanding the small proportion of land occupied by village housing, its construction posed a particularly intractable problem for the central government. Rural land is owned by collectives, rather than the state, and village houses are the private property of families. Most villages are unplanned and situated on, or alongside, arable land. As a general rule, the more fertile the land, the more numerous are the villages; the wealthier the villages, the more expansive are its houses.⁹ Throughout the 1990s, villagers invested an ever-larger proportion of their incomes in housing. Per capita floor space nearly doubled, a growing percentage of households owned multiple dwellings, and residences were being demolished and rebuilt with greater frequency.¹⁰ Consequently, although

3. *China Daily* 10 December 1998, 17 December 1998, accessed at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy>; *China News Digest*, 9 May 1999, 15 June 1998, accessed at <http://www.cnd.org/CND-Global/>; Xinhua, 5 February 1999, accessed at <http://www.xinhuanet.com>.

4. *China Daily*, 11 March 2001.

5. Zhou Min and Kong Qingping, “Ji du huanle ji du chou: guanyu nongcun jianfangde de touchi” (“A few degrees of joy, a few degrees of gloom: perspectives on the rural house-building craze”), *Cunzhen jianshe (Village and Town Construction)*, No. 10 (1995), pp. 40–41.

6. Zhang Tingwei, “Land market forces and government’s role in sprawl: the case of China,” *Cities*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2000), pp. 26–27; *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1998 (China’s Statistical Yearbook 1998)* (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1998), p. 389; *Zhongguo tudi nianjian 1994–1995 (China’s Land Yearbook 1994–1995)* (Beijing: Beijing renmin chubanshe, 1995), pp. 148–49; *Zhongguo tudi tongji nianjian 1997 (China’s Land Statistical Yearbook 1997)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dadi chubanshe, 1997), p. 199.

7. Robert Ash and Richard Louis Edmonds, “China’s land resources, environment and agricultural production,” *The China Quarterly*, No 156 (1998), pp. 840–852.

8. Zhejiang sheng tudi guanli ju, *Zhejiang tudi ziyuan (Zhejiang’s Land Resources)* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang kexue jishu chubanshe, 1999); *Zhongguo gengdi wanli xing (The Great March of China’s Cultivated Land)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dadi chubanshe, 1998), p. 471; *Zhejiang tongji nianjian 1999 (Zhejiang Statistical Yearbook 1999)* (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1999), p. 184.

9. Liu Zuochen, “Guanzhu nong judian yong di” (“On farmers’ use of land for house sites”), *Zhongguo tudi (China’s Land)*, No. 12 (1998), pp. 4–6; Lin Wenyi, “Nongfang jianshe yong di de zifa qingxiang jie jue tujing” (“Spontaneous trends in farmers’ use of land for housing construction and avenues for their resolution”), *Chengxiang jianshe (Urban and Rural Construction)*, No. 9 (1990), pp. 29–30.

10. *Statistical Yearbook 1998*, p. 324; Wu Liyue, “Tan Shanghai jiaoku nongfang jianshe de ji ge wenti” (“A discussion of problems relating to rural housing construction in Shanghai’s suburbs”), *Chengxiang jianshe*, No. 6 (1990), pp. 24–25; *China Daily*, 2 March 1998; Zhao Zanyuan, Dai Yunzhuo, Shen Zhiqin, Zhang Jia, “Nongcun jumin dian heli yong di tantao” (“A discussion of village residents’ rational use of land”), *Zhongguo tudi*, No. 8 (1998),

industrial and infrastructural construction on farmland slowed in response to land use controls, the area of farmland used for dwellings continued to increase.¹¹

Given the importance and scale of the problem, it is not surprising that people working in a variety of disciplines, both in China and abroad, have investigated the reasons for “the rural house-building craze.” Much of the resulting literature focuses on the effect of institutional reforms, particularly in property rights and markets, in shaping farmers’ attitudes towards land use.¹² Scholars reason that ambiguous, collective property rights in farmland and the uncertainties that attend the periodic redistribution of contracted land discourage the conservation and improvement of farmland. In addition, the possibility that houses might establish informal, enduring, use-rights to adjoining farmland offers positive incentives for construction that are not weighed against the cost considerations which would come into play if land was priced by markets.¹³ Other studies show that villagers have responded to the emergence of new markets by erecting roadside shop-houses and rental housing in peri-urban areas.¹⁴

The development of markets also created conflicts of interest between different levels of government, resulting in lax and corrupt land administration.¹⁵ Although the central government aims to ensure the rational, sustainable use of farmland, lower-level officials enthusiastically promote housing construction. They earn revenue from land transfers and construction fees, win promotions by creating jobs in the sector, and garner popular support by approving and subsidizing housing.¹⁶ In many areas, village leaders supplement their income by “selling” house

footnote continued

pp. 34–36; Zha Jiade, “Zhejiang sheng cunzhen jianshe zhili zhengdun de qishi” (“Revelations on the improvement and rectification of rural construction in Zhejiang province”), *Cunzhen jianshe*, No. 2 (1990), pp. 21–23.

11. Xie Dixiang, Wei Qingquan and Deng Yixiang, “Nongcun jianfang de sikao yu jianyi” (“Reflections and recommendations on rural housing construction”), *Cunzhen jianshe*, No. 2 (1999), pp. 26–27; *Statistical Yearbook 1998*, pp. 233, 385.

12. Excellent analyses of these arguments are given in Jean Oi and Andrew Walder (eds.), *Property Rights and Economic Reform in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999); Peter Ho, “Who owns China’s land? Policies, property rights and deliberate institutional ambiguity,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 166 (June 2001), pp. 394–421.

13. Gershon Feder, Lawrence J. Lau, Justin Y. Lin and Xiaopeng Luo, “The determinants of farm investment and residential construction in post-reform China,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1992), pp. 1–26; Shang Chunrong, “Woguo nongcun tudi zhidu zhong cunzai de ruogan wenti” (“Some problems occurring in China’s rural land system”), *Shantou daxue bao (Shantou University Journal)*, No. 4 (1998), pp. 1–6; Lynn T. White, *Unstately Power vol. 1: Local Causes of China’s Economic Reforms* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); Zhu Ling and Jiang Zhongyi, “From brigade to village community: the land tenure system and rural development in China,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1993), pp. 441–46.

14. Mao Yueliang, “Nongcun zhajidi guanli yu gengdi baohu” (“The management of rural house sites and conservation of farmland”), *Zhejiang sheng tudi xuehui huikan (Zhejiang Province Land Studies Association Journal)*, No. 10 (1998), pp. 87–91.

15. *Beijing Review*, 9–15 November 1998, pp. 16–17; see also George P. Brown, “Arable land loss in rural China: policy and implementation in Jiangsu province,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 10 (1995), pp. 922–941.

16. *China Daily*, 17 December 1998, p. 2; Yan Jiushi, “Nongmin jianfang yongdi zhong de ‘cunpi’ xianxiang toushi” (“The phenomenon of ‘village approval’ for farmers’ use of land

sites.¹⁷ In sum, new institutional arrangements encouraged “the rural house-building craze.”

Persuasive as these explanations are, two other strands of research suggest that property rights and markets might not offer the key to understanding villagers’ attitudes towards housing and land use. James Kung found that farmers in less-developed regions actually opposed proposals to extend and consolidate land contracts because the regular readjustment of plots accommodated changes in the size of their households.¹⁸ Surveys showed that the area of land devoted to new housing was similar in villages that never redistributed contract land and in villages that regularly readjusted holdings, suggesting that tenurial security does not influence construction activities.¹⁹ In fact, the low profitability of agriculture is a stronger disincentive to farming than land use contracts,²⁰ and simultaneously depresses whatever exchange value protected farmland has.

But why invest scarce resources in housing construction? Sociologists have long argued that complex social and cultural factors propel house-building. Villagers’ ownership of a large, new house demonstrates their wealth and “face” and helps to attract marriage and business partners.²¹ Parents who construct dwellings earn the gratitude of their children, commonly expressed in the form of support in old age. House-building offers opportunities to improve the living conditions of a family not only in the present but also, through geomantic intervention, in the future.²² I adopted an emic approach in investigating “the rural house-building craze,” asking villagers why they continue to build ever-bigger dwellings. A further question was whether recent government efforts to control land use will succeed in slowing their construction of housing.

My data, collected in four villages in Zhejiang province in the late summer of 2000, suggest that “the rural house-building craze” is not primarily caused by concerns about property rights in farmland. Nor, in

footnote continued

for housing construction”), *Cunzhen jianshe*, No. 11 (1999), pp. 41; *Zhejiang ribao* (*Zhejiang Daily*), 13, 15, 30 January, 4 February 1999, *Dushi kuaibao* (*Capital Express*), 5, 7 July 2000.

17. While use-rights can be leased, land cannot legally be bought and sold in China. Nevertheless, illegal sales occur frequently. See *Guotu ziyuan bao* (*National Land Resources Daily*), 28 April 1999; 21, 30 June 2000; 7 July 2000.

18. James K. Kung, “Equal entitlement versus tenure security under a regime of collective property rights: peasants’ preference for institutions in post-reform Chinese agriculture,” *Journal of Comparative Economics*, No. 21 (1995), pp. 82–111.

19. Zhao *et al.*, “A discussion of village residents’ rational use of land.”

20. Elisabeth J. Croll and Huang Ping, “Migration for and against agriculture in eight Chinese villages,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 149 (1997), pp. 129–146.

21. Terry McKinley, *The Distribution of Wealth in Rural China* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 77; Sally Sargeson, *Reworking China’s Proletariat* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1999), pp. 215–19; Knapp, “Rural housing and village transformation in Taiwan and Fujian”; this point is also made by Feder *et al.*, “The determinants of farm investment,” p. 8.

22. Ji Fengyu, “Zai zhili zhengdun zhong zhengque yindao nongcun zhuzhai jianshe” (“Correctly directing rural housing construction in the course of rectification and improvement”), *Cunzhen jianshe*, No. 6 (1990), pp. 20–21, 15; Zhang Guoliang, “Nongcun zhuzhai jianshe de sikao” (“Reflections on rural housing construction”), *Cunzhen jianshe*, No. 5 (1990), pp. 22–23.

most cases, is it a response to new markets. Rather, house-building reflects families' demographic and social aspirations. Villagers are building for their family's future. These motives were overlooked by the authors of the Chinese government's latest legislative attempt to preserve arable land: the 1999 (revised) Land Administration Law. Their oversight might weaken the effectiveness of the law in controlling rural housing construction.

The article discusses, in turn, the provisions and aims of the 1999 legislation relating to the use of land for housing; the field sites and methodology employed in Zhejiang; research findings; and the implications of these findings for legislative efforts to preserve farmland by controlling land use.

1999 (Revised) Land Administration Law

On 1 January 1999, China's revised Land Administration Law²³ (LAL) came into effect. Described by the Chinese press as imposing "the world's strictest land-use regulations,"²⁴ the LAL explicitly aimed to strengthen land administration, safeguard public ownership of land, use arable land rationally, and protect land resources so as to promote sustainable development.²⁵

The LAL hinges on a dual strategy. First, the government has asserted centralized, macro-controls over land use. Annual plans for land utilization must conform to the national plan for economic development and plans specifying categories and targets of land utilization. Each province is required to formulate and submit for central government approval a long-term plan that classifies land for agricultural, construction and other purposes, and guarantees to protect and improve the quality of more than 80 per cent of farmland. The conversion of protected farmland to non-agricultural purposes requires approval from the State Council, provinces or municipalities directly under the central government. If such approval is granted, an equivalent area of new farmland must be created. Construction on collectively owned land must conform to plans drawn up by villages in accordance with town, county, provincial and national land use plans. Village households are only eligible to own one house, the ground floor of which must not exceed provincial standards. In so far as it is possible, new residences must be built on old or vacant house sites. Villagers who have sold or rented their house are ineligible to apply for a site. Non-complying dwellings built before promulgation of the LAL cannot be rebuilt or extended. Associated regulations issued in April 1999 grant lower level governments the authority to reclaim land approved for

23. *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo, Zhonghua renmin gongheguo tudi guanli fa, di er ci xiuzheng (People's Republic of China Land Administration Law, revised)*, 1999.

24. Xinhua, 1 January 1999.

25. Jiang Ailin, "Xin jiu tudi guanli fa bijiao" ("A comparison of the new and old Land Administration Laws"), *Zhongguo fangdichan (Real Estate in China)*, No. 2 (1999), p. 13-15.

construction but left idle.²⁶ The Ministry of Land and Resources is authorized to investigate breaches of the LAL and recommend disciplinary action or charges against those guilty of infringements.²⁷

Secondly, the LAL strengthens villagers' collective and individual property rights in land. Ownership rights are exercised by village collective economic organizations or village committees. Farmers' contracts for farmland are guaranteed for 30 years unless changes are approved by a two-thirds majority of the village assembly. Farmers that undertake to operate farmland under contract have a duty to protect the land and use it in conformity with the purposes of use stipulated in the contract. In the event that farmland is requisitioned by the state or used for construction by the collective, compensation payments and resettlement subsidies must be reported publicly and subsidies transferred in full to resettled villagers.

Comparative studies elsewhere suggest that land conservation legislation is most effective when it accommodates economic, demographic and social changes.²⁸ The dual strategies incorporated into the LAL reflect assumptions on the part of its architects that the law not only required stringent centralized planning, reporting and enforcement of land use and regulation of real estate markets, but also had to serve villagers' economic interests.²⁹ Strengthening farmers' land use rights was expected to encourage their preservation of arable land and discourage construction on farmland.³⁰ Field research was designed, in part, to assess whether the lawmakers had overestimated the incentive effects of stronger land-use rights and underestimated demographic and social motives for housing construction.

Research Location and Methodology

In many respects, Zhejiang is an ideal location in which to investigate villagers' attitudes towards housing construction and land use controls. In the decade preceding promulgation of the LAL, provincial and municipal governments in Zhejiang introduced a range of measures to limit construction on farmland. In 1989, a plan was drawn up to protect basic agricultural districts. County Land Management Bureaus were forbidden to approve more house sites than allowed by annual quotas. In 1995, the provincial government convened a "leaders' small group" to direct and act upon six investigations into land management. One year later, the

26. *China News Digest*, 9 May 1999; *China Daily*, 4 February 1999; *Guotu ziyuan bao*, 2 March 1999.

27. Pi Chunxie (ed.), *Xin tudi guanli fa lilun yu shiyong (Theory and Application of the New Land Administration Law)* (Beijing: Zhongguo fazhi chubanshe, 1999); *Xinhua*, 7 January 1999.

28. Rachele Alterman, "The challenge of farmland preservation: lessons from a six-nation comparison," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (1997), pp. 220–243; Jeanne S. White, "Beating ploughshares into townhouses: the loss of farmland and strategies for slowing its conversion to nonagricultural use," *Environmental Law*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1998), pp. 113–143.

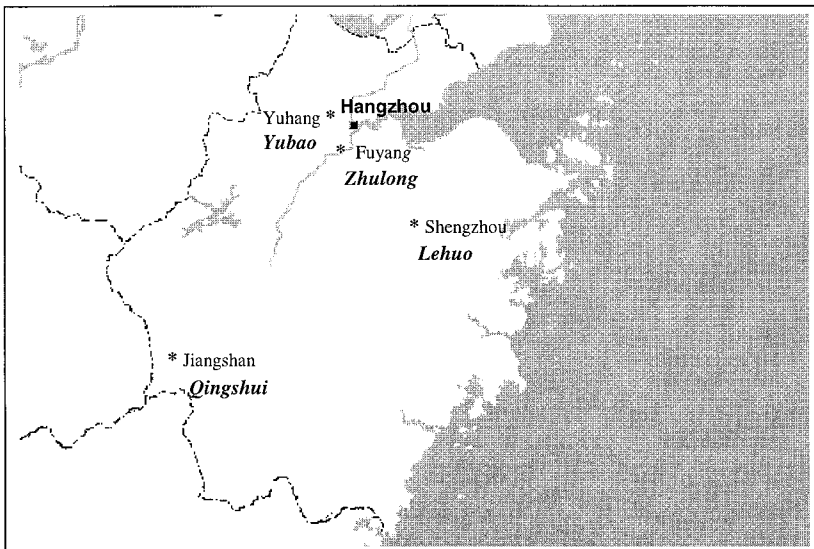
29. Joshua Muldavin, "The paradoxes of environmental policy and resource management in reform-era China," *Economic Geography*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (2000), pp. 244–284.

30. *Xinhua*, 24 August 1998; *China Daily*, 21 December 1998.

provincial People’s Congress passed “Regulations on the supervision and control of land in Zhejiang.”³¹ Further regulations, passed in 2000 to supplement the LAL, stipulated that new houses must be constructed in rows on vacant sites or hillsides; sites can only be allocated to new households or families that demolish their dwellings and relinquish the site for reallocation; and that the area of the site is determined by household size and land quality.³² Everywhere, slogans exhorted people to conserve farmland for future generations. Nevertheless, at the end of 2000 Zhu Yinchuan, head of the Land Management Bureau in the provincial capital, Hangzhou, lamented that farmland was still being lost, and structurally sound houses demolished to be replaced by ever more expansive residences.³³

However, the high levels of industrialization, urbanization and income in Zhejiang make it an atypical location in which to conduct research into rural housing and land use. With that anomaly in mind, four villages were selected to encompass variations in their distance to cities, economic structure and average income, the amount of time spent farming, the proportion of household income derived from agriculture and the degree to which settlements are planned. All four are administrative villages with similar populations, small households, miniscule landholdings and

Map 1: Research Sites in Zhejiang Province



31. *Land Yearbook 1997*, pp. 90–91.

32. Zhejiang sheng renda fazhi weiyuanhui, Zhejiang sheng guotu ziyuan ting, *Zhejiang sheng shishi “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo tudi guanli fa” banfa* (Zhejiang Province Methods for Implementing “People’s Republic of China Land Administration Law”) (Hangzhou, 2000); Interviews Shengzhou city Land Management Bureau, 22 July 2000, Shaoxing city Land Management Bureau, 20 July 2000.

33. *Guotu ziyuan bao*, 15 November 2000.

numerous new houses – defined as dwellings built between 1990 and 2000 (see Tables 1 and 2).

The first village, which I shall call Lehuo,³⁴ is located near Shengzhou city (see Map 1). It is well served by road and rail transport. Four features distinguish Lehuo from the other villages surveyed. First, it is a model of unified planning. As early as 1983, Shengzhou city government implemented village planning to conserve farmland, reduce land disputes and revitalize “empty heart” villages, created when families abandoned old houses in the centre of settlements and rebuilt on the outskirts.³⁵ Now, a new four-storey committee building, a well-resourced cultural centre and an elderly residents’ association hall form the “heart” of Lehuo. In the 1990s, approximately two-thirds of all housing was rebuilt in row-fashion alongside five-metre wide concrete roads. All dwellings have electricity, piped water and sewerage, and most have telephones. Secondly, Lehuo is wealthy. More than 66 per cent of surveyed households reported annual incomes of between 25,001 and 45,000 *yuan*. The main sources of wealth are quarrying, ceramics, metal casting, electronics, apparel and city *jiaozhi* restaurants. Thirdly, unlike the other research sites where contract land was reallocated twice during the 1990s, in Lehuo there was no readjustment. Most residents could not be bothered farming, so informally and gratis they offered their land to the few who still farmed. Finally, many married women in Lehuo described themselves as “housewives.”

Yubao is administered by Yuhang city, but lies in a ribbon of suburban development that spools out alongside a new highway. Construction of the highway led to the resumption of Yubao land by Hangzhou city. Several villagers expressed a hope that Hangzhou would resume more land, because the compensation fees and resettlement subsidies paid by Hangzhou were higher than those paid by Yuhang. A plan to encourage infill development was approved in 1999 but has not yet been implemented. The settlement pattern is dispersed, with concrete roads providing vehicle access to clusters of houses interspersed with rice fields and fish-ponds. All houses have electricity and piped water, and 70 per cent have telephones. Approximately two-thirds of village families occupy new, free-standing houses, many of which were built on reclaimed paddy and ponds. The main sources of income are private commerce, transport, and printing and processing factories. All young adults are in non-agricultural employment, prompting jokes that farming expertise in the village will pass away with the demise of the elderly. The only significant source of agricultural income is from aquaculture. Contracts for fish-ponds rotate annually. Yubao’s factories employ some 400 immigrant workers – equal to nearly one-third of the population. This fuels a thriving rental market. Rents received are not declared, so official statistics on income are understated. Some 40 per cent of households surveyed reported annual incomes ranging between 11,001 and 35,000 *yuan*, but

34. Village names have been altered to protect respondents’ anonymity.

35. Shengzhou *tudi guanli ju*, *Shengzhou shi tudi zhi* (*History of Land in Shengzhou City*) (Shengzhou, 1999).

Table 1: Village Profiles

| Village | Distance to major city | Per cent of total output value in township from agriculture: industry: services | Population | Number households (mean average size of household) | Mean average per capita annual income (yuan) | Mean average per capita area cultivated land (mu) | Mean average number days per annum spent farming |
|----------|------------------------|---|------------|--|--|---|--|
| | | | | | | | |
| Lehuo | 6 | 10: 39: 51 | 867 | 289 (3) | 14,528 | 0.4 | 59 |
| Yubao | 10 | 14: 56: 30 | 1,010 | 300 (3.3) | 4,880* (estimate 8,000–10,000) | 0.48 | 60 |
| Qingshui | 14 | 27: 43: 30 | 1,150 | 335 (3.4) | 2,900 | 0.5 | 187 |
| Zhulong | 25 | 5: 88: 7 | 1,152 | 331 (3.4) | 5,200 | 0.49 | 110 |

Note:

*Income understated in published statistics.

Sources:

Yuhang nianjian 2000 (*Yuhang Yearbook 2000*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000); *Fuyang nianjian 1998* (*Fuyang Yearbook 1998*) (Fuyang: Fuyang shi difang zhi bianjuan weiyuanhui 1998); *Shengzhou shi tudi zhi* (*History of Land in Shengzhou City*) (Shengzhou, 1999); *Zhejiang tongji nianjian 1999* (*Zhejiang Statistical Yearbook 1999*) (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1999); Interviews 10–12, 21–23, 26–28 July, 5–7 August 2000; internal documents of township Land Management Bureaus and villagers' committees.

Table 2: Characteristics of Respondents and Their Housing Circumstances

| Village | Number | Sex* f = female, m = male | Mean average age | Education levels (<i>n</i> = none, <i>p</i> = primary, <i>lm</i> = lower middle, <i>hm</i> = higher middle, <i>t</i> = tertiary) | | Number (and %) of surveyed households that built new houses 1990– 2000 | Mean average square metres floor space 1995: 2000 |
|----------|--------|------------------------------|---------------------|--|----------------------------------|---|---|
| | | | | <i>p</i> | <i>lm</i> , <i>hm</i> , <i>t</i> | | |
| Lehuo | 92 | 15 (f), 77 (m) | 42.5 | 5 (n), 16 (p), 64 (lm), 7 (hm) | 54 (58.7 per cent) | 246.6: 299 | |
| Yubao | 83 | 22 (f), 61 (m) | 39 | 6 (n), 32 (p), 30 (lm), 11 (hm), 4 (t) | 52 (62.7 per cent) | 208: 236 | |
| Qingshui | 89 | 17 (f), 61 (m) | 45.3 | 12 (n), 40 (p), 32 (lm), 4 (hm), 1 (t) | 40 (44.9 per cent) | 147.8: 166 | |
| Zhulong | 32 | 1 (f), 31 (m) | 38.6 | 9 (p), 18 (lm), 2 (hm), 3 (t) | 27 (84.4 per cent) | 99.6: 234.5 | |

Note:

*The gender imbalance of survey respondents is partly redressed by the gender composition of the pool of interviewees (19 female; 21 male).

almost half of all households declined to declare their incomes. From interviews, I gleaned that the average annual household income was between 20,000 and 30,000 *yuan*.

Qingshui, under the jurisdiction of Jiangshan city, is in the most remote and poorest region of Zhejiang, the south-west. A plan for Qingshui was devised in the late 1990s, but has not been implemented. The settlement comprises several small hamlets clustered around networks of narrow dirt and cobble paths that lead off a road connecting two small towns. There is no vehicular access inside the hamlets. Between 1990 and 2000, more than one-third of all households built new dwellings, predominantly on farmland alongside the road and paths. All houses have electricity, but few have telephones and there is no piped water or sewerage. In comparison to the houses built in the other three villages, new residences in Qingshui are small, unattractive and ill-equipped. Nevertheless, they are vastly superior to the dilapidated earth and wooden houses in which the majority of villagers still live. Some 19 per cent of households surveyed reported annual incomes less than 5,000 *yuan*, and a further 38.2 per cent reported earning between 5,001 and 11,000 *yuan*. Since the closure in 1999 of a cement factory in which nearly 100 villagers had been employed, the main sources of income have been the sale of goose feathers, pigs and dried vegetables. Owing to a lack of off-farm employment opportunities in the area, many households also rely on remittances from youngsters working in cities.

Zhulong is in a river valley 25 kilometres from its governing municipality, Fuyang. The village spans a road linking two provincial highways. In contrast to the experience of Yubao, the resumption of land to allow construction of this road in 1989 caused dissension among villagers. The person who was village Party secretary at that time said that as soon as he received notice that the road was to be built, he requisitioned and merged the land of all 18 production teams in the village and, setting aside 60 *mu* on either side of the new road, redistributed the remaining farmland. Then:

I sold the [60 *mu* of] land to people who wanted to establish factories and shops. People from other villages bought it, as well as some locals. They paid 10,000 *yuan* per *mu* ... The villagers didn't like it at the time. They said they didn't have enough land left to support them. This area is half mountain. There isn't much paddy land. But they couldn't see that they would be better off working in the factories. They complained, wrote a letter to the Ministry of Agriculture in Beijing asking that I be investigated. Nothing happened. I'd done the right thing. A lot of people who complained then are making good money in these factories now. You can't make money farming, can you?³⁶

New canning, paper and rubber factories certainly are a major source of the 15,000 to 25,000 *yuan* earned annually by most households. However, farmers were not compensated for the reduced allocation of farmland. Moreover, industrialization has resulted in the pollution of

36. Interview Zhulong, 14 July 2000.

Zhulong's river, paddy fields and the wells that supply potable water. A village plan began to be implemented only in 1999. Slightly more than half of all households live in new dwellings built alongside the main road. These are serviced by piped water and vehicular access. Across the river, old village houses are separated by narrow, winding paths, have limited exposure to sunlight and inadequate provision for water and waste disposal.

Three research strategies were employed. Self-administered questionnaires were first distributed to a random sample of households in Zhulong. The low response rate (10 per cent) produced unrepresentative data. In Lehuo, Yubao and Qingshui, college students were trained to administer a survey. Between 25 and 35 per cent of all households in these villages completed anonymous questionnaires, giving a total sample of 296 households. Data allowed correlation and comparison of respondents' sex, age, housing situation, occupation, income, age, education and attitudes towards housing and land use controls. Semi-structured interviews lasting between one and two hours were conducted with ten additional households in each village. And officials from local city and town Land Management Bureaus, and village heads, Party secretaries and committee members, were interviewed to determine how villagers had responded to the constraints on land use imposed by the LAL.

Motives for House-Building: Owners and Aspirants

As might be expected, there is a rough correlation between the mean average income in a village, the proportion of households owning new dwellings and the area occupied by new houses. In the two wealthiest villages, Lehuo and Yubao, more than half of all households live in new houses, and those houses are considerably larger than new dwellings in Qingshui and Zhulong. However, although houses in the wealthiest village, Lehuo, have the largest average floor space, the village does not display the highest level of building activity over the past ten years. In Lehuo, incomes rose dramatically in the 1980s. Many families rebuilt as soon as they became well off. In the 1990s, the village committee implemented unified planning and land-use controls. The owners of new houses preferred to renovate rather than attempt to meet eligibility criteria for new house sites.

Similarly, in all four villages, the great majority of households with incomes over 20,000 *yuan* occupy new, large dwellings. Several wealthy households have more than one residence and many are renovating houses that were only constructed a few years earlier. Officials are disproportionately represented among new house-owners, and their new houses tend to be larger than others. In Qingshui, the house and courtyard of one of the Party secretary's three residences occupies approximately 250 square metres of land, more than twice the maximum area allowed to large families under the provincial regulations. Conversely, the poorer the family, the less likely they are to own a new house, a large house or more than one house. And the more days that are spent farming and the

higher is the proportion of household income derived from agriculture, the poorer the family.

To assess potential demand for new houses, villagers were asked whether, if given sufficient money, they would rebuild. With few exceptions, most respondents that occupy dwellings put up after 1994 said that they would not. They preferred to invest in a business, children’s education or a new car. Virtually all of the 123 households that live in old houses and most in dwellings built before 1994 said that they would rebuild. The only villagers that do not aspire to a new house are a handful of elderly couples who either like their familiar surroundings or fear that if they rebuild, their children might move in with them: “We are used to this life. Older people don’t like moving. You’ve heard the saying, ‘Gold house, silver house, isn’t as good as my family’s grass house (*Jin wu, yin wu, buru jiali de caowu*)’.”³⁷

As shown in Table 3, of 173 surveyed households with new houses, the great majority said they built because they wanted to sustain, expand or divide their families. Space for children was the single most common motive mentioned. Given that many households, particularly in Qingshui and Zhulong, had originally lived in cramped conditions, this explanation seems unremarkable at first glance. However, even the residents of sizeable old houses in Lehuo and Yubao said they needed to provide more space for children. And although interviewees repeatedly said that all the new space was necessary, without exception new buildings contained empty rooms – often occupying one-third the total floor area:

Interviewee: Each room is used every day. Downstairs we have the shop and storerooms. The second floor has bedrooms, a bathroom, living area and kitchen.

Sargeson: What about the third floor?

Interviewee: We only use it to store a few things.

Sargeson: Didn’t you say you use every room every day?

Interviewee: The mice use it! No one uses their third floor. Families only have a few people so they don’t need all that space.³⁸

When asked their reason for constructing surplus space, some people answered that they simply wanted a house as big as their neighbours’ house. But the majority mentioned another family-centred motive for building: the extra room might be used by their son after his marriage. The provision of separate living areas for new couples is seen as a means of eliminating friction between generations, particularly between mothers and daughters-in-law, and thereby allowing family extension. It also helps to maintain harmony even in families that have already divided: “I’d like three big living areas, 20 square metres or more, containing separate bedrooms and bathrooms. Then when my sons came home for holidays there would be enough room for us all.”³⁹

Extra rooms also provide for the reallocation of space from collective to individual purposes. New houses typically comprise layers of suites of

37. Interview Lehuo, 23 July 2000.

38. Interview Zhulong, 11 July 2000.

39. Interview Lehuo, 24 July 2000.

Table 3: Primary Motive for Building New House (number of individual responses)

| Village | Space for children | Old house dilapidated, inconvenient | Son marrying | For descendants | Old house site requisitioned | Household division | Wanted more beautiful house | Improve commercial opportunities |
|----------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Lehuo | 11 | 12 | 10 | 8 | 3 | 7 | 1 | — |
| Yubao | 11 | 16 | 11 | 9 | 3 | 3 | 3 | — |
| Qingshui | 20 | 9 | 4 | 2 | 10 | 2 | 3 | — |
| Zhulong | 12 | 5 | — | 3 | — | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| Total | 54 | 42 | 25 | 22 | 16 | 16 | 9 | 2 |

Note:

If respondents said two reasons were of equal importance, they were allowed to nominate both.

Table 4: Second Most Important Motive for Building New House (number of individual responses)

| Village | Old house dilapidated, inconvenient | Space for children | For descendants | Household division | Son marrying | Neighbours built new house | Houses are a | | | |
|----------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| | | | | | | | Wanted more beautiful house | better investment than bank savings | Good location available (feng shui) | Old house site requisitioned |
| Lehuo | 13 | 10 | 7 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | - |
| Yubao | 21 | 13 | 3 | 2 | 7 | - | 2 | - | - | - |
| Qingshui | 21 | 10 | - | 4 | - | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Zhulong | 5 | 3 | 7 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 1 | - | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 60 | 36 | 17 | 13 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 3 | 3 | 2 |

living rooms, bedrooms and bathrooms that accommodate the increasingly divergent lifestyles of different generations. The elderly can retire early, while children can play computer games and watch their preferred television programmes out of their parents' hearing. Although the spatial individualization and differentiation of family life is most apparent in the affluent villages, even in the poorest village, Qingshui, new houses contain empty floors that will be fitted out and decorated for single generations when money becomes available. Simultaneously, residual collective living areas are being redesigned. The formal reception hall at the front of houses that once functioned as the stage for ethical instruction and public and kinship ceremonial⁴⁰ is being supplanted by an asymmetrical, open-plan living area designed and furnished to mould interaction among individuals within the family, rather than to accommodate interaction between the family as an hierarchical kin group and the outside world and the after-life.

The impending marriage of a son frequently motivated housing construction in the two wealthiest villages. One successful Lehuo entrepreneur constructed a new house for each of his two teenage sons, specifically to enhance their marriage prospects. But even in Qingshui, this was thought to be such a popular strategy that one respondent wrote: "A new house shows that a family has an unmarried son. Without the son, they would have no need to rebuild."⁴¹ When asked whether the possession of a new house is advantageous to young people finding a marriage partner, more than 80 per cent of those surveyed agreed, arguing: "No woman would marry a man without a new house." A new house demonstrates to a woman that the man's family has "face," assets, financial security and good social contacts and can provide her with comfortable, hygienic and "more private" accommodation. Approximately one-sixth of all respondents explicitly wrote that new houses allay potential brides' fears about indebtedness: "A new house tells women that if they marry into that family, there will be no need for the newly-weds to borrow to build."

Concerns about the deleterious effects of debt on families' future opportunities are another common motive for house-building. In Yubao, where there is widespread antipathy towards both out-migration and family division, houses are intended to provide descendent generations with an unmortgaged dwelling, thereby allowing them to invest in businesses.

Equally common is the idea that a new house will provide a sanctuary to which peripatetic members of the family can retire in their old age. Respondents in Lehuo, Qingshui and Zhulong all remarked that youngsters who had migrated in search of work would return in their old age

40. Ronald G. Knapp, *China's Living Houses: Folk Belief, Symbols and Household Ornamentation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999); Jing Qimin, *Zhongguo chuantong minju (Traditional Chinese Dwellings)* (Tianjin: Tianjin University Press, 1999), p. 110.

41. For a fictional treatment of this subject, see Gao Xiaosheng, "Li Shunda builds a house," in Lee Yee (ed.), *The New Realism* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1983), pp. 31–55.

to live in the houses their wages helped to build: “Leaves fall to the roots of the tree (*yeluo-guigen*).” One respondent in Lehuo said that the beneficial *fengshui* of his family’s old house-site had helped his sons to establish themselves abroad. He would rebuild on the site to preserve their luck and provide them with a “home-land” where they could meet up with old friends, eat familiar food and speak dialect.

Family division historically has prompted housing construction in the Chinese countryside. Statistics indicate that early family division is the norm in three of the surveyed villages, where even stem households are becoming uncommon. In fact, in all villages but Yubao, the great majority of interviewees thought that newly married couples should move into their own house. In Lehuo and Zhulong, villagers thought separate households were preferable because they gave people the freedom to determine their own routines and consumption patterns. As one old fellow put it: “We eat different foods. We like soft foods, young people like food that is crisp.”⁴² In Qingshui, young couples were expected to become self-supporting: “We are always scrimping and saving, whereas young people waste money. If my sons had their way, they wouldn’t divide. They’d want us to support them and look after their kids. But I think they should stand alone and look after themselves.”⁴³ One woman in Qingshui, covered in bruises from a recent beating, wistfully said that division reduced intra-familial conflict. Like the provision of more space for children, then, division is viewed as a means of allowing families to maintain harmonious relations among generations with increasingly divergent lifestyles. And, like the provision of space for children, division requires the construction of a new house.

In some cases, however, the causal relationship between household division and building is reversed: the desire to build precipitates division. In Lehuo and Qingshui, a few families functioned as single production and consumption units, despite the fact that offspring owned new residences. This bogus division was explained as a stratagem to acquire another house site and build in case land-use controls were imposed and construction costs escalated.⁴⁴

Of the primary motives given for housing construction, the second most frequently cited explanation was that the family’s old house was dilapidated or inconvenient. Yet in the two affluent villages, some houses that were described as dilapidated or inconvenient were structurally sound, large and had been built within the past decade. In Qingshui, where old housing stock is in considerably worse repair than elsewhere, only nine respondents said their old residence was derelict. The anomaly reflects higher expectations of housing in the former two villages, fed by their receptivity, via proximity to cities and television and magazine advertising, to changing fashions. The standards applied in defining a

42. Interview Lehuo, 24 July 2000.

43. Interview Qingshui, 27 July 2000.

44. This finding supports previous reports that division may allow villagers to achieve goals relating to land or housing. See, for example, Ya Ping Wang and Alan Murie, *Housing Policy and Practice in China* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 222.

house as “dilapidated” or “backward” further underscores the influence of marketing in establishing ever-higher expectations of architectural sophistication and comfort in Lehuo and Yubao. Villagers who want to live in a “more beautiful” house described their ideal as a free-standing, pastel coloured Californian bungalow or European villa (*bieshu*), with ornamental balconies, an enclosed garden and decorative furnishings. The three-storey rectangular concrete structures thrown up in the 1980s and early 1990s were disparaged, even by their owners, as ugly, poorly designed and anachronistic: “I’d like a prettier house. This is really old-fashioned. The houses got bigger in the 1990s but now people are less concerned with the size and height of a house and more concerned with external appearance and modern interior designs.”⁴⁵ In Qingshui, people are still satisfied with houses that offer shelter from the weather and mosquitoes and ample space. Nevertheless, in all villages aesthetic preferences are decidedly modern and urban-influenced. While a few people expressed admiration for the quality of carpentry in traditional Zhejiang timber dwellings, none agreed with my opinion that old houses have some appealing aesthetic and practical features. Instead, interviewees unfavourably compared “messy,” “unhygienic” village houses with the stylish, clean apartments they saw on television and in magazines.

Neighbouring houses supply another comparative standard by which the adequacy of dwellings is measured. Many villagers said they were forced to build because their neighbours had done so and the family’s reputation was being compromised: “You can tell what a family’s situation is like if they live in a dump. Everyone borrows money to build a house so the family gains ‘face’.”⁴⁶

Some villagers acknowledged that they built in order to reap economic benefits. Notwithstanding the planning regulations in force in Lehuo, a young couple there were constructing two huge buildings that they intended to lease out as commercial premises. Three people in Zhulong said they “bought” roadside sites to build shop-houses. A handful of respondents said that they had judged building to be a better investment than bank savings,⁴⁷ while one niggardly old fellow in Qingshui said he had rebuilt solely to stop his sons spending his spare cash. A few wanted to occupy promising geomantic sites.

Yet even among the villagers that gave overtly economic reasons for building houses, none mentioned a desire to secure use rights to farmland or the low cost of converting farmland to residential usage. Not one respondent said they would contract more farmland or increase their investment in farming now that tenure had been guaranteed. None expressed regret that their new house occupied farmland that, under the LAL, they could have contracted for 30 years. Indeed, one full-time farmer in Zhulong, oblivious to the provisions of the LAL, said that if he

45. Interview Yubao, 7 August 2000.

46. Interview Yubao, 6 August 2000.

47. Knapp mentions that houses “‘store’ wealth” in “Rural housing and village transformation,” p. 783.

could afford to, he would build a house on his contract land because the scenery, light and air there were good. In short, house-building is not a second-best option in the absence of secure property rights in farmland. Villagers simply do not consider agriculture to be a worthwhile investment.

Housing, on the other hand, is. It is an investment in the family’s future. A new house accommodates increasingly diverse, individualized lifestyles and thereby allows for family extension. It conveys to the world information about the wealth and status of its inhabitants, giving sons a wider choice of potential partners. Unencumbered by debt, young couples can channel money into business and education. Finally, a new house offers security and sanctuary to out-migrants and serves as a conduit through which the wages they earn can be drawn back into the family.

Social Factors Mediating Rural House-Building

Villagers’ housing aspirations and construction activities are not moderated by endogenous social pressures (see Table 5). Rather, there is a consensus among rural residents that new houses deliver social, demographic, economic and aesthetic benefits to all.

When asked whether community or neighbourly relations were affected by housing construction, fewer than 10 per cent of all respondents agreed. The overwhelming majority of those who replied in the affirmative said that trust, sociability and community solidarity increase, partly because housing loans circulate and space for home entertainment is created. Several people said mutual respect and community pride has been fostered by the “urbanization” and “beautification” of their villages. Only half a dozen respondents complained that housing construction contributed to an increase in disputes and a loss of social cohesion. In Qingshui, 20 per cent of those surveyed thought status competition had intensified. Although few expressed antipathy towards housing construction, many disapproved of the demolition of old houses because it wasted space that could be used for storage and livestock.

A quarter of survey respondents agreed that house-building encourages geographical mobility. The larger percentage of positive responses in Yubao (27.7 per cent) and Qingshui (37.1 per cent) reflects the relatively high incidence of in-migration into the former and out-migration from the latter village. In both locations, respondents said that migration is, in large measure, prompted by the necessity to accumulate funds for housing construction. All viewed this causal connection in a positive light, as a stimulus to communication, employment and marriage.

Despite the centrality of family aspirations in propelling housing construction, new home-owners do not think that their new house has altered family interaction and personal esteem. Data summarized in Table 6 indicate that while some occupants of new houses in Yubao (18.1 per cent) and Qingshui (20.2 per cent) acknowledged that their daily routines had altered, the overwhelming majority said that they were unaware of any change in their home life. A few reported that having more privacy,

Table 5: Social Impact of Housing Construction (% of all survey respondents)

| Because of the construction and occupation of new housing: | Community (collective) feeling has changed | | | Attitudes of villagers and neighbours towards my family changed | | | Status competition has increased | | | Geographical mobility increased | | |
|--|--|------|------|---|------|------|----------------------------------|------|------|---------------------------------|------|------|
| | Yes | No | Dk | Yes | No | Dk | Yes | No | Dk | Yes | No | Dk |
| | Lehuo | 2.2 | 89.1 | 8.7 | 9.8 | 45.7 | 44.5 | 10.9 | 81.5 | 7.6 | 20.7 | 68.5 |
| Yubao | 12 | 86.7 | 1.3 | 8.4 | 62.7 | 28.9 | 13.3 | 85.5 | 1.2 | 27.7 | 68.7 | 3.6 |
| Qingshui | 5.6 | 85.4 | 9 | 9 | 41.6 | 49.4 | 20.2 | 70.8 | 9 | 37.1 | 50.6 | 12.3 |
| Zhulong | 3.1 | 56.3 | 40.6 | 6.3 | 59.4 | 34.4 | 3.1 | 53.1 | 43.9 | 3.2 | 46.9 | 46.9 |
| Total | 6.1 | 83.8 | 10.1 | 8.8 | 50.7 | 40.5 | 13.5 | 76.4 | 10.1 | 25.7 | 60.8 | 13.5 |

Note:

Dk = don't know.

Table 6: Impact of New Housing on Family (% new house owners)

| Village | Living in a new house has changed our daily routines | | | Living in a new house has improved our feelings of self-esteem | | | I am satisfied with my new house | | |
|----------|--|------|------|--|------|------|----------------------------------|-----|------|
| | Yes | No | Dk | Yes | No | Dk | Yes | No | Dk |
| Lehuo | 7.6 | 47.8 | 44.6 | 14.1 | 40.2 | 45.7 | 53.3 | 6.5 | 40.2 |
| Yubao | 18.1 | 54.2 | 27.7 | 13.3 | 57.8 | 28.9 | 66.3 | 4.8 | 28.9 |
| Qingshui | 20.2 | 33.7 | 46.1 | 12.4 | 41.6 | 46 | 50.6 | 6.7 | 42.7 |
| Zhulong | 9.4 | 50 | 40.6 | 18.8 | 43.8 | 37.4 | 71.9 | 3.1 | 25 |
| Total | 14.5 | 45.6 | 39.9 | 13.9 | 45.9 | 40.2 | 58.1 | 5.7 | 46.2 |

independence and plumbed bathrooms made family relations less strained. Some 13.9 per cent agreed that their self-esteem improved after moving into their new abode.

But only 58 per cent of new home-owners felt satisfied with their house. The variation between Lehuo and Qingshui, where only around half of all those surveyed are content with their new house, and the other villages in which there are notably higher levels of satisfaction, might be a consequence of the heavy planning restrictions imposed in the first village and the limited economic capacity of Qingshui's residents. However, I submit two additional explanations for the counter-intuitive finding that many new home-owners are dissatisfied with their house. First, new houses are not just intended to provide immediate gratification to their inhabitants. They are built to improve the family's future. People who are unsure whether they are satisfied with their new house do not yet know whether it will help them to achieve their longer-term goals. Secondly, these findings reflect villagers' sensitivity to the fact that standards of comfort and style are changing rapidly in China. The residents of what, yesterday, was considered to be a "beautiful" house have found that a television programme, magazine advertisement or their neighbours have now set a new benchmark of "beauty" – a benchmark that they, too, must try to surpass.⁴⁸

Attitudes Towards Housing Construction and Land Use Controls

Staff in the township Land Management Bureaus administering the four surveyed villages all bemoaned the added paperwork associated with the more rigorous application, approval, reporting and monitoring procedures, transparency requirements and enforcement provisions that came into effect with promulgation of the LAL and Zhejiang province's supplementary regulations. Nevertheless, they were confident that these would help to reduce the rate and scale of housing construction in the countryside. They claimed that in keeping with the LAL, only new households could apply for vacant house sites and construction could only occur on land that was zoned for residential purposes. Any household that wanted to rebuild had to produce certificates of ownership and approval for the construction of their old house – an impossible task for most villagers. All township bureaus had erected billboards to educate villagers about the new law and regulations, advise them of the fees payable for the allocation of house sites and construction permits and warn them of sanctions against illegal construction and excessive land use. Notices about compensation payments for land requisition and relocation, pending building applications and the penalties meted out for infringements were placed in government offices and local newspapers.

Government statistics and my interviews indicate that these measures

48. Zhang Shuigen suggests this possibility in "Nongmin zhuzhai jianshe: xingwei, xintai fenxi" ("Rural housing construction: an analysis of behaviour and attitudes"), *Cunzhen jianshe*, No. 5 (1990), pp. 24–25, 21.

Table 7: Perceptions of the Degree of Difficulty in Constructing Housing after 1999 (% surveyed households)

| <i>Since January 1999, has the construction of housing become:</i> | <i>More difficult</i> | <i>No change</i> | <i>Easier</i> | <i>Don't know</i> |
|--|-----------------------|------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Lehuo | 33.7 | 52.2 | 9.8 | 4.3 |
| Yubao | 72.3 | 21.7 | 4.8 | 1.2 |
| Qingshui | 56.2 | 21.3 | 18 | 4.5 |
| Zhulong | 25 | 34.4 | 21.9 | 18.8 |
| Total | 50.3 | 32.4 | 12.2 | 5.1 |

did indeed slow the pace of construction. Late in 1998, the Bureaus were deluged with applications for new house sites as people rushed to get approval before the new law came into effect. In 1999, there was an approximately 40 per cent reduction in the number of applications and in the first half of 2000 a further drop of around 50 per cent. Implementation of the LAL also intensified the decline, observable since the mid-1990s, in the number of cases of illegal and extensive building. Fewer disputes over housing construction and fewer infringements of regulations were recorded in each township.

As shown in Table 7, most survey respondents believed that in 1999–2000 it was more difficult to construct housing than it had been previously. When asked why, the majority referred to more complicated application processes, restrictive conditions and the shortage of available house sites. Not surprisingly, in Lehuo, where planning regulations had been in place for some years, slightly more than half the surveyed villagers said the degree of difficulty had not changed. In contrast, in Qingshui and Zhulong many respondents answered that housing construction was actually easier than in the past, not because of a relaxation of government constraints but because their incomes had improved or building materials were cheaper.

The extent to which the LAL succeeds in conserving farmland will be determined not only by the immensity of the obstacles it places in the way of would-be builders, but also by the degree to which there is popular understanding of, and support for, controls over housing construction and land-use. Table 8 indicates that although a majority of villagers surveyed said that they knew nothing about the LAL, there was widespread agreement that the central government should control rural housing construction. Moreover, the reasons most frequently given in support for central government controls concur with the government's own logic: China has too little arable land; farmland should be used in the most economically efficient manner; therefore excessive and illegal con-

Table 8: Support for Controls over Rural Housing Construction (% surveyed households)

| Village | Have you heard about the LAL? | | Should the central government control rural housing construction? | | | Should the villagers' committee control rural housing construction? | | | Are current government controls over housing construction adequately strong? | | |
|----------|-------------------------------|------|---|------|------|---|------|------|--|------|------|
| | Yes | No | Yes | No | Dk | Yes | No | Dk | Yes | No | Dk |
| Lehuo | 32.6 | 67.4 | 69.6 | 14.1 | 16.3 | 71.7 | 12 | 16.3 | 90.2 | 3.3 | 6.5 |
| Yubao | 26.5 | 73.5 | 92.8 | 3.6 | 3.6 | 94 | 3.6 | 2.4 | 92.8 | 6 | 1.2 |
| Qingshui | 19.1 | 80.9 | 70.8 | 21.3 | 7.9 | 70.8 | 18 | 11.2 | 88.8 | 5.6 | 5.6 |
| Zhulong | 37.5 | 62.5 | 53.1 | 12.5 | 21.9 | 53.1 | 9.4 | 37.5 | 53.1 | 15.6 | 37.5 |
| Total | 29 | 71 | 74.4 | 13.2 | 12.4 | 75.7 | 11.1 | 14.5 | 86.5 | 6.1 | 7.4 |

struction should be prevented. Several people stated that competition for land should be regulated so as to protect poor families’ land-use rights and welfare. Similar explanations were given in support of village committee controls over housing construction. However, there was a slight, but telling, difference in emphasis. Fewer respondents mentioned land shortages and the need for economic efficiency, and more wrote that lower-level governments should support and enforce national laws and protect the land use rights of the poor and future generations.

Although respondents’ age, income and education do not affect their backing for land use controls, there are small, but significant, variations between villages. Respondents in Yubao who have had first-hand experience of the effects of rapid urbanization and unregulated real estate markets and are confronted almost daily by conservation propaganda emanating from Hangzhou are more enthusiastic about government intervention than are the residents of other villages (see Figure 1). Respondents in Zhulong expressed the least support for stronger government controls, perhaps reflecting suspicions based on governments’ previous failure to prevent the “sale” of village land by the old Party secretary.

There also are variations in the attitudes of different occupational groups. The greater the amount of time villagers spend farming, the less likely they are to agree that governments should regulate housing construction (see Figure 1, Table 9). In view of the fact that nowadays, autonomy in production is one of the few perks of farming, it is understandable that some farmers are reluctant to relinquish their right to determine land use. Moreover, among all villagers, farmers are least likely already to own a new house or to own multiple houses, and they may fear they will be denied the chance to achieve their housing goals.

Figure 1: Should the Government Control Rural Housing Construction? (0 = Yes, 1 = No)

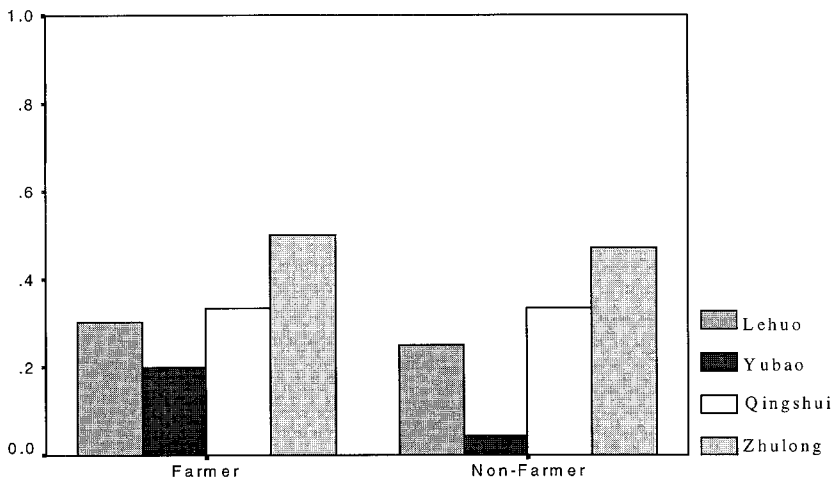


Table 9: Should the Government Control Rural Housing Construction? (% respondents)

| <i>Days spent farming per annum</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Don't know</i> |
|-------------------------------------|------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Less than 50 days | 87.2 | 9.6 | 3.2 |
| 50–100 days | 74.4 | 12.8 | 12.8 |
| More than 101 days | 72 | 21.3 | 6.7 |

Villagers' agreement with the principle of government controls over housing does not extend to support for a strengthening of regulations. On the contrary, in Yubao, Qingshui and Zhulong villagers perceive a shortcoming not in the legislation, but in its implementation by local officials. They repeatedly complained that village planning is ignored by township governments:

*We should have a proper plan to organize reconstruction of the village. But the town government doesn't plan anything, except its own business. All these officials think about is how to make more money. In the past the countryside was well governed, but the officials we've got now spend all their time smoking expensive cigarettes and drinking beer that costs 2.5 yuan a bottle. They come here and look at us villagers and say, "You're doing all right. You're building houses so you must be making money." Then they say we should pay this tax and that fee and a fine for something else ... People have become short-sighted as a result of this. They only care about their own families and don't bother to plan collectively.*⁴⁹

Nor do villagers believe that land use regulations are applied equally and impartially. They said that township officials and village leaders waive prohibitions against multiple house-ownership, extensive building and the allocation of sites to households that have rented or sold houses when processing applications from their family and friends. In Yubao and Zhulong, local officials were further accused of abusing their administrative authority in order to gain a monopoly over local rental and real estate markets:

Some of the officials have two houses. Two new houses! They live in one and rent out the other. Of course, there are also ordinary families that didn't demolish their old houses when they rebuilt. The old places might be left empty or rented out. That's different to what the leaders do, though. They monopolize all the best house locations, and then when ordinary people like us apply for a new site they say there isn't any land and we have to demolish our old house and build on the same site.⁵⁰

Villagers were not alone in voicing suspicions that some lower-level governments were continuing to approve construction on farmland. According to a leading cadre in the Land Management Bureau of Shaoxing city:

49. Interview Qingshui, 27 July 2000.

50. Interview Yubao, 6 August 2000.

Some officials in the Construction Bureaus haven't quite come to terms with the new regime, and still follow their old ways. Most of these sorts of problems, of Construction Bureaus approving building on agricultural land, eventually will be resolved because the new Law removes the authority of town level governments to approve changes in land use.⁵¹

Of greater significance for this study, however, is the fact that villagers' housing aims are not moderated by their support for either the principle or the legislation of farmland conservation. Even in Yubao, the community that most strongly approves of restrictions on house-building, new houses are considered essential to the achievement of families' demographic and social aims. To this end, households are prepared to divide, send their members out to work and demolish large, structurally sound houses in order to secure permission to rebuild.

Conclusion

Cross-cultural studies of home ownership demonstrate that people usually have multiple reasons for wanting a house. Behind the economically "rational" references to exorbitant rental costs and asset accumulation that are frequently advanced to explain the acquisition of a dwelling, there often lurks the idea that a house is necessary to sustain a family.⁵²

In Zhejiang villages, new houses are built to accommodate changes in the life cycle and lifestyle of families and help them succeed socially and economically. These goals motivate both affluent and poor households. As my data show, the location and economy of a village has only a small effect on the occurrence of these motives. Certainly, in comparison to Qingshui and Zhulong, the residents of Lehuo and Yubao are more inclined to build because they consider their old house too dilapidated or inconvenient. That assessment is informed by income growth and exposure to changing architectural styles. But there too, responsiveness to fashion is bound up with the desire to provide for the family's demographic and social needs in the future.

On the other hand, village location and economy and household income do affect the construction of housing. Proximity to a city offers business and employment opportunities which, in turn, boost mean average incomes. Except in Lehuo where land management officials and planners limit housing, high incomes increase the propensity to build and the scale of building. Because farmers' incomes are lower than non-farmers' incomes, a reliance on earnings from agriculture is correlated with low levels of housing consumption. Farming simply does not provide villagers with enough money to achieve their ambitions with

51. Interview Shaoxing city Land Management Bureau, 20 July 2000.

52. Lynne Richards, *Nobody's Home: Dreams and Realities in a New Suburb* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 117–139; Richard Wilk, "The built environment and consumer decisions," in Susan Kent (ed.), *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space: An Interdisciplinary, Cross-cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 34–42.

respect to housing. Hence, in pursuit of their dream of home-ownership, farmers and their offspring abandon agriculture and migrate in search of work.

With respect to the effectiveness of the LAL, 18 months after its promulgation the new legislation had begun to control the use of collectively owned land in the surveyed villages, primarily through requiring stricter reporting and transparency by lower levels of government and removing their authority to approve the construction of housing on farmland. The concentrated settlement pattern and slowdown in building activity that occurred in Lehuo after Shengzhou city government began planning villages suggest that if the law continues to be implemented, it will help to conserve arable land and subdue “the rural house-building craze.”

However, findings from this study have some negative implications for the Chinese government’s goal of preserving farmland by controlling housing construction. First, popular support for conservation goals and controls on housing construction is undermined by the fact that villagers have little confidence in the capacity or willingness of officials to manage land for the collective good. Some township governments and village leaders have failed to abide by the LAL. Others have shown partiality in approving applications for house sites or have monopolized land. Farmers, in particular, are ambivalent about government constraints on housing construction. In view of widespread protests that have been triggered by villagers’ dissatisfaction over local governments’ excessive extractions, usurpation of collective property rights, and housing demolition and forced relocation,⁵³ it is possible that government efforts to restrict villagers’ use of land for housing will also be resisted.

Secondly, the administrative controls incorporated into the LAL are not supplemented by positive inducements that address the social and demographic aspirations propelling “the rural house-building craze.” The property rights incentives built into the law are unlikely to be effective, given that farming is considered to be unprofitable and land is not valued either as a source of income or as an exchange item.

Indeed, some clauses in the LAL may limit villagers’ ability to accumulate investment capital, rent accommodation and provide welfare. In order to rebuild, many households will demolish dwellings that might otherwise serve as rental properties, depriving them of an extra source of revenue and leaving in-migrants and young couples without housing. Other households will divide in order to become eligible to apply for new building sites. The poor will disperse as able-bodied adults migrate to earn money for housing construction. In less affluent villages, the sick and elderly might be faced with solitude as well as material deprivation.

53. Xiaolin Guo, “Land expropriation and rural conflicts in China,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 166 (2001), pp. 422–439; Liu Yuan, “Fighting city hall,” *Asiaweek*, 26 January 2001, pp. 30–34; Reuters, 3 September 2000, accessed at <http://www.insidechina.com/investorsinsight/business>; Sally Sargeson and Zhang Jian, “Reassessing the role of the local state: a case study of local government interventions in property rights reform in a Hangzhou district,” *The China Journal*, No. 42 (1999), pp. 77–99.

Eventually, of course, out-migration together with declining birth rates will reduce demand for rural housing. But my findings suggest that these changes are unlikely to exert a significant effect in the near future. Throughout the countryside migrants’ remittances are funding the building of utopian sanctuaries for absent family members. The majority of villagers that participated in this research have only one child, but like many parents of only-children they are determined to provide their offspring with “the best.”⁵⁴ Village norms and architectural and lifestyle marketing depict “the best” as a beautiful, modern villa that provides space, “face,” privacy and a period of debt-free grace in which the family can diversify its investments. In the Zhejiang countryside, these attitudes will continue to fuel “the rural-house-building craze.”

54. Deborah S. Davis and Julia S. Sensenbrenner, “Commercializing childhood: parental purchases for Shanghai’s only child,” in Deborah S. Davis (ed.), *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), pp. 54–79.