

Nail Houses, Land Rights, and Frames of Injustice on China's Protest Landscape¹

Steve Hess

Miami University, OH

With increasing frequency, headline-grabbing protests have become a defining feature of news emanating from China in recent years. Brave individuals have emerged as central actors in heroic epics popularly called “nail-house sagas” that depict citizens defiantly fighting developers and officials to prevent the destruction of their homes. The “nail-house” or *dingzihu* (钉子户) is a commonly-used Chinese neologism that refers to homes inhabited by persons who tenaciously refuse to vacate them even after they have been slated for demolition. During China's recent urban real estate boom, many residents have been evicted to make way for new development projects. Those who have resisted, using a broad repertoire of tactics, have in the eyes of developers, become serious nuisances, leading to the characterization of their households (*hu*) as stubborn “nails” (*dingzi*) on a plank of wood that cannot be easily be hammered down. These public dramas have captivated audiences throughout China. Among the best known *dramatis personae* are: Wu Ping and Yang Wu, nail-house residents whose home sat teetering on a 17-meter-high pile of earth in the center of urban Chongqing; Pan Rong, the Shanghai resident who lobbed Molotov cocktails at a bulldozer from her roof as it attempted to demolish her three-story home; and Tang Fuzhen, who fatally set herself aflame from atop her Chengdu home as officials entered to evict her.

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While a growing body of literature has examined protest activity in China, much of it focuses on frequent and sometimes intense, but categorically localized, incidents of labor protest. Relatively few studies have sought to come to terms with the political impact of increasingly high-profile cases of individuals who have stubbornly fought the demolition of their homes, making highly publicized appeals and engaging in extreme tactics to draw public sympathy to their plights.

This essay hopes to illuminate the relevance of these cases of recalcitrant citizens defending their homes from development, and to suggest how recent nail-house incidents such as the 2007 Chongqing case may reveal a changing protest landscape in China. Innovative, media-savvy protest entrepreneurs have become increasingly effective at adopting symbols and ideas with cultural resonance in order to shape frames of injustice. By doing so they seek to convince the wider public of the unfairness of their plight, winning sympathy and bringing pressure to bear on the developers and officials who seek to expel them from their homes. This essay does not suggest that these developments necessarily foreshadow an emergent land rights-based protest movement. Instead, this study makes a less ambitious claim: taken together, the emergence of highly skilled, media-savvy protest entrepreneurs; the innovative use of culturally resonant material to frame injustice; and the development of a popularly-embraced narrative of heroic nail-house defenders all reveal a new terrain of land rights-centered protest. It is a protest hospitable to greater and better coordinated contentious action in the future.²

Some observers might assume the June 4, 1989 incident at Tiananmen Square represented something of an ending to Chinese protest activity followed by a period of repression-induced quiescence. But events on the ground more recently suggest that June 4 instead represented the beginning of a new and dynamic wave of popular protest throughout much of the country. In many respects, growing protest activity in the reform era should be expected, as market reforms, widely acknowledged as having generated impressive

² In this work, the term “contentious action” refers to collective actions carried out by groups or individuals who lack regular institutional access to their political system and therefore make their rights-based claims through deliberately disruptive actions.

growth in Chinese gross domestic product (GDP) over the last three decades, have also revealed a darker side, contributing to economic insecurity, rising prices, and growing socioeconomic disparities. Recent empirical studies have suggested that the boom years of early reform in the 1980s generated wealth and opportunities in China that transcended geographic region, urban vs. rural location, and social class. But the post-Tiananmen fiscal tightening helped spur increasing inequality and absolute declines in living standards and employment opportunities for China's poorest residents.

As noted by Shaoguang Wang in 2006, deep socioeconomic inequalities emerged in line with greater economic openness and "fiscal squeeze" during the period of "deep reform" (1994–2002); these contributed to growing unemployment and diverging trajectories for the haves and have-nots, including absolute losses for the underprivileged. This was a clear change from the economic development of the 1980s, when gains were more equitable, income differentials could be seen only in relative terms, and all social groups made absolute economic gains.³ In the same vein, Huang Yasheng found that absolute actual household incomes and standards of living likely declined during the 1990s, spawning despair for many of China's poorest citizens. Such feelings were only compounded by corresponding government cuts in expenditures on education, social services, and health care. This outcome was largely hidden by Beijing's lowering of the official poverty line, a change that often masked the declines in well-being seen by much of the population beginning the 1990s.⁴ These setbacks in the material condition of wide segments of Chinese society were transposed against the substantial gains in wealth enjoyed by the upwardly mobile middle and upper classes. By 2005, 236,000 of this segment had become millionaires (in U.S. dollars),⁵ providing at least the potential for

³ Shaoguang Wang, "Openness and Inequality: The Case of China," in *China's Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition*, eds. Lowell Dittmer and Guoli Liu. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 252-258.

⁴ Huang Yasheng, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 246-250.

class-based resentment and substantial social discord, as suggested by recent survey findings that a reported 71.7% of Chinese residents consider national inequality to be too large.⁶

Certainly, as might be expected from growing socioeconomic inequalities and declines in absolute material conditions for the poorest, protest among discontented groups has recurrently appeared as a feature of the contemporary Chinese political landscape. As suggested by the often-quoted rise in “mass incidents” from 10,000 in 1994 to 87,000 in 2005,⁷ contentious acts have risen in lockstep with the early to mid-1990s material declines mentioned above. Feng Chen argues persuasively that many of these protests have been associated with real material declines, occurring in reaction to “subsistence crises” in which “workers have incomes far below local minimum wages or no incomes at all for a period of time.”⁸ William Hurst and Kevin O’Brien, in their study of China’s contentious pensioners, found that this group of working class citizens also frequently engaged in collective action in response to materially-based grievances, taking to the streets not only out of “moral indignation” but also in pursuit of basic “survival needs.”⁹ In a similar vein, Yongshun Cai argued that the frequency of protests by laid-off workers was motivated primarily by economic losses they had endured. Protest was targeted at state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or

⁵ Deborah Davis and Wang Feng. “Poverty and Wealth in Postsocialist China: An Overview,” in idem., eds., *Creating Wealth and Poverty in Postsocialist China*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009 3.

⁶ Chunping Han and Martin King Whyte. “The Social Contours of Distributive Injustice Feelings in Contemporary China,” in *ibid.*, 200.

⁷ Joseph Kahn, “Pace and Scope of Protest in China Accelerated in '05,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/20/international/asia/20china.html>, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁸ Feng Chen. “Subsistence Crises, Managerial Corruption and Labor Protests in China,” *China Journal* 44 (July 2000), 42.

⁹ William Hurst and Kevin O'Brien. “China's Contentious Pensioners,” *China Quarterly* 170 (June 2002), 353.

local governments, the entities most capable of remedying their poverty and insecurity.¹⁰ More recently, Feng Chen noted that the structural changes associated with economic reform policies had “given rise to deep grievances” among working class citizens, many of whom yearned for the economic security [and assurances of basic livelihood] of the Maoist period and were willing to engage in collective action against factory privatization.¹¹ As noted in these works, the expansion of income gaps and growing economic insecurity motivated a large, growing wave of protests throughout much of China’s aggrieved working class population.

This growing frequency of contentious activity in China, for reasons related to its distinctive political culture, has been viewed as an area of particular concern by the current regime. Elizabeth Perry has noted that popular protest has long been an important feature of Chinese politics, with origins dating back over 2,000 years. Protest in Chinese popular consciousness was closely linked to the idea of the “Mandate of Heaven.” Like its counterpart in pre-modern European history, the mandate served to legitimize a ruler’s divine right to rule, but in the Chinese context it was revocable. Historically during the imperial period, the success of a popular rebellion in toppling a regime demonstrated that imperial rule had become corrupt and lost its heavenly mandate, necessitating a “purifying” revolution.¹² As a result, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elites have paid special attention to managing the recurring outbreaks of social unrest by aggrieved communities: officials see such events, if ignored, as potentially threatening political stability and the regime’s popular legitimacy.

Looking at the lessons of Chinese history, Perry has noted that the key to successful revolutions has been “bridging the (often state-imposed) categories that set various groups of people against

¹⁰ Yongshun Cai. “The Resistance of Chinese Laid-off Workers in the Reform Period,” *China Quarterly* 170 (June 2002), 329.

¹¹ Feng Chen. “Privatization and Its Discontents in Chinese Factories,” *China Quarterly* (March 2006) 185, 43.

¹² Elizabeth J. Perry, “Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Popular Protest in Modern China,” *Critical Asian Studies* 33:2 (June 2001), 163-180.

one another.” Such a feat was accomplished by political entrepreneurs who mobilized disparate groups and was facilitated by poorly-executed state repression that inflamed rather than diminished public outrage.¹³ Learning from the fallen dynasties of China’s past, the current CCP, much like Machiavelli’s half-man, half-beast centaur described in *The Prince*,¹⁴ has maintained its grip on power by approaching popular challenges with a strategic blend of tolerance and coercion. This response has limited the expansion of protest while being careful to avoid encouraging the development of a true political opposition through the blanket application of brute force.

Despite the expansive scope of protest in China today, scholars have reached a broad consensus that the outbreak of protest in contemporary society, while frequent and often highly charged, has emerged as a fragmented and localized phenomenon. No true social movements, defined by Sidney Tarrow as “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities,” have emerged to coordinate the separate, narrowly focused, and localized protests carried out by a multitude of groups in China today.¹⁵ A burgeoning literature focusing on the labor protests of industrial SOE workers has provided some clues as to why declining material conditions for members of this sector, and their frequent but localized contentious actions, have failed to coalesce into larger, more coherent mass movements. As noted by Hurst, since 1993 workers in China’s SOEs have experienced massive layoffs; by 2005 there was a reduction of 73 million jobs, just over half of all positions.¹⁶ This has created a substantial decline in SOE workers’ real and perceived economic well-being; it has also resulted in numerous but uncoordinated acts of contention.

¹³ Ibid., 166.

¹⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli. *The Prince*, trans. W.K. Marriott. Rockville, Md.: Arc Manor Publishers, 2007, 72.

¹⁵ Sidney Tarrow. *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 4.

¹⁶ William Hurst. *The Chinese Worker after Socialism* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 16.

In explaining this outcome, Dorothy Solinger has argued that many laid-off SOE workers have been dissuaded from contentious action by the limited but nevertheless available opportunities to find employment elsewhere.¹⁷ For Marc Blecher, labor activism has been limited by workers' absorption of the values of market hegemony, which have convinced many that economic reform has mostly been beneficial and the insecurities and problems associated with it are unavoidable and reasonable.¹⁸ Ching Kwan Lee has suggested that the decentralization of authority in the reform era and the geographic unevenness of economic opportunities have left contentious workers disunited and focused on local, rather than national, injustices and targets. Thus, as Lee sees it, they engage in limited, locality- or factory-based "cellular activism."¹⁹

These analyses of protest in China have focused primarily on the limitations of the political opportunity structures presented by contemporary Chinese society. These include the structure of the state, the number of available private-sector jobs for workers, and the distribution of economic benefits. Scholars have spent less time dissecting how enterprising individuals in China might be able to reframe the ways that poor, fragmented groups understand and respond to existing conditions.

"Frames" and "framing" are two central concepts that help us understand how materially deprived social groups might come to perceive their condition in society and seek to challenge it. These ideas were first introduced in Erving Goffman's 1974 *Frame Analysis* and have since received substantial attention in social movement literature.²⁰ David Snow et al., quoting from Goffman's earlier work,

¹⁷ Dorothy J. Solinger. "Labour Market Reform and the Plight of the Laid-off Proletariat," *China Quarterly* 170 (June 2002), 304-326.

¹⁸ Marc J. Blecher. "Hegemony and Workers' Politics in China," *China Quarterly* 170 (June 2002), 283-303.

¹⁹ Ching Kwan Lee. *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 9.

²⁰ Erving Goffman. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974, 21.

provide the classic definition of frames: “‘Schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ occurrences within their life space and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective.”²¹

Frames play a central role in the development of social movements, revealing and amplifying the “seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefin[ing] as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable.”²² As noted by Barrington Moore, “[T]he human capacity to ignore and accept suffering is essential to human survival.” Therefore, in developing a movement against oppression, “groups of people [must] cease to take their social surroundings for granted and come to reject or actively oppose them.”²³ Realizing and collectively turning against repression requires “cultural transformation,” the “undermining of the prevailing system of beliefs that confers legitimacy,” the development of a new form of political identity, and “new diagnoses for human misery and new standards for their condemnation.”²⁴ Doug McAdam similarly suggests that before effective collective action can take place, “people must [first] collectively define their situations as unjust.”²⁵

²¹ David Snow, et al. “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 51:4 (August 1986), 464.

²² David Snow. “Master Frames and Cycles of Protest,” in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, 137.

²³ Barrington Moore. *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* White Plains, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1978, 81, 88.

²⁴ Ibid.,

²⁵ Doug McAdam. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 51.

William Gamson presents “injustice frames” as a necessary element in translating general grievances and perceived unfairness into the “righteous anger” associated with injustice. Gamson views the process as establishing a concrete target that is seen as being an agent clearly responsible for one’s unfair condition, making “defining targets a crucial battleground in the development or containment of injustice frames.”²⁶ Targeting human agents of injustice alone, however, can lead to misdirected collective action that results only in the replacement of or harm to a single individual, but not the adjustment of the structural factors that aid in exploitation. It is therefore essential that the human targets of injustice frames be linked to the broader social structure that creates inequity. As noted by Sidney Tarrow, “collective action” frames emerge as movement entrepreneurs identify grievances. The entrepreneurs link them with other grievances, establishing frames of meaning that reverberate with the general population’s “cultural predispositions and communicate a uniform message to power-holders and others.”²⁷

In this process, movement entrepreneurs do not simply invent new cultural meanings but rather draw on available cultural material that resonates well with the groups they seek to mobilize. They then refashion such material into a frame guiding participants toward a specific plan of action directed against a particular target; the target is held responsible for the injustices that the contending group has had to endure. Frames, therefore, are critical elements for aggrieved parties such as SOE workers and homeowners resisting demolition. Frames allow them to identify the injustices, inspire them with symbols of meaning, and provide them with a coherent strategy to contend with the groups and systems that have exploited and mistreated them.

Many scholars have been skeptical of the idea that social entrepreneurs might be able to construct effective, culturally resonant frames in contexts with closed political opportunity structures. According to Kevin O’Brien and Rachel Stern, developing effective frames, while clearly important for mobilizing aggrieved parties in any

²⁶ William Gamson. *Talking Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 32.

²⁷ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 122.

context, poses particular challenges in an authoritarian context in China. The Chinese state has powerful controls over freedom of speech, association, and the media, and can interfere in the construction of effective collective action frames.²⁸ In agreement with this assessment, Hurst suggests that in a Chinese context, public discourse is tightly restricted and therefore collective action frames cannot be readily fashioned according to the desires of the movement. This leaves actions taken (or not taken) by contentious parties to be “powerfully conditioned by the structural setting in which they live.”²⁹

Hurst instead offers the idea of “mass frames” or “coherent worldviews shaped in large part by the structurally-rooted collective life experience of social groups.”³⁰ He applies the concept of mass frames to explain the somewhat divergent understandings of worker protest presented by Solinger, Blecher, and Lee. In Hurst’s reading, these different views are not entirely incompatible but rather reflect divergent regionally based political economic factors: local state capacity, the business climate for SOEs, job opportunities for laid-off workers, the relevance of working class society, and local governments’ relationship to Beijing.³¹ These different region-specific conditions influence how and when workers protest, the grievances they claim, the entity they target with contentious action, and the mass frames they apply in pursuing their goals. As suggested by Hurst’s framework, patterns of worker contention have varied dramatically across regions. This cross-regional incoherence has likely subverted any potential nationwide movement in the direction of cross-regional worker activism, preventing SOE workers from effectively challenging the losses they incurred during China’s reform and opening up periods.

²⁸ Kevin O’Brien; Rachel Stern. “Introduction: Studying Contention in Contemporary China,” in *Popular Protest in China*, ed. Kevin O’Brien. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008, 19.

²⁹ Hurst. *The Chinese Worker after Socialism*, p. 116; William Hurst, “Mass Frames and Worker Protest,” in O’Brien, ed., *Popular Protest in China*, 74-75.

³⁰ Hurst, “Mass Frames and Worker Protest,” 71.

³¹ Hurst, *The Chinese Worker after Socialism*, 30.

In a piece written a decade ago, Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Jaswinder Khattrra criticized the kind of “structural” analysis presented by Hurst in 2009 and other students of protest in China, many of whom have embraced a political opportunity structure approach to understanding popular contention. As noted by Goodwin et al. in 1999, “The bias lurking beneath these problems [with the political opportunity structure approach] is that ‘structural’ factors (i.e., factors that are relatively stable over time and outside the control of movement actors) are seen and emphasized more readily than others—and nonstructural factors are often analyzed as though they were structural factors.”³² In much of the political opportunity structure literature and its more recent variant, the political process approach, scholars have tended to argue that even highly aggrieved and well-resourced groups and individuals would not be able to carry out effective acts of contention *if they lacked the necessary political opportunities*.³³ These “political opportunities” refer to a wide range of structural elements, but most commonly to the openness of the political system, stability and unity of the political elite, presence of elite allies, and the state’s capacity for repression.

In more-recent political process literature, these structural conditions have been supplemented by the seemingly non-structural elements of “mobilizing structures,” the organizations and networks that facilitate popular mobilization, and also the “cultural framings” or collective “identities, grievances, and shared goals” mentioned above. But, as Goodwin et al. note, mobilization structures are often presented more as preexisting ties between group members; cultural frames appear as preset structures that either fit or do not.³⁴ These non-structural elements are, in short, treated in a structural way, and are less important relative to political opportunity structures, only becoming consequential once windows of opportunity within those

³² Jeff Goodwin; James M. Jasper; and Jaswinder Khattrra. “Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory,” *Sociological Forum* 14:1 (March 1999), 29.

³³ Ibid, 30. For an extensive presentation of the political opportunity structure approach, see Tarrow, *Power in Movement*.

³⁴ Goodwin, et al. “Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine,” 41-47.

structures have opened. My approach certainly does not reject the many well-researched findings of political opportunity structure studies entirely. But this article seeks to highlight the agency of media-savvy social entrepreneurs resisting land seizures and home demolitions. The point is that some people have overcome the limitations imposed by China's closed opportunity structure to frame their individual plights as unjust and rally public sympathy behind them.

In recent years the scholarly literature on protest in China, which once focused primarily on the labor actions of laid-off industrial SOE workers, has expanded its attention to the land rights-based protests of citizens facing home demolitions and land seizures, both in rural and urban areas. As shown by Chih-jou Jay Chen's database of news reports of mass protest activities from 1997 to 2007, in recent years protests have grown in number and violence. They have also involved new social groups not typically thought of as sources of contention.³⁵ Most prominent among the newly-emerging protest groups have been rural peasants (31.3% of all reported protest activities in 2007), ordinary urban citizens (9.1%), displaced city residents (7.0%), Foreign direct investment (FDI) enterprise workers (6.2%), white-collar workers (4.8%), and students (3.8%). This trend has left SOE workers as merely one of many participant groups in an increasingly diverse field of protest groups.

Chen's data also account for the motivations of protestors. We can pool these diverse actions of resistance—to urban relocation/forced evictions, to rural land seizures, and to impingement on closely-related “property rights”—into a general category of “land rights.” Then, it becomes evident that land rights, initially a relatively marginal issue within the broader scope of protest in the late 1990s and early 2000s, have quickly risen to prominence in recent years. As of 2007, land rights were associated with 33.6% of all reported incidents of protest, doubling their 1997 share of 15.7%.³⁶

³⁵ Chih-jou Jay Chen. “Growing Social Unrest and Emergent Protest Groups in China,” in *Rise of China: Beijing's Strategies and Implications for the Asia-Pacific*, eds. Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Cheng-yi Lin London: Routledge, 2009, 87-8.

³⁶ Chen, “Growing Social Unrest,” 2009.

This trend of an increasing tide of land rights protests is supported by the findings of Yongshun Cai, who argues that since agricultural taxes were revoked in 2000, land disputes have become the leading cause of rural social unrest. Cai sees this as being demonstrated by a Chinese research group's findings that land use complaints made up 73% of petitions filed to Beijing by peasants in 2003, and that in 130 mass confrontations between peasants and police in 2004, 67% originated in land use disputes.³⁷ Confrontations with authorities over land use have also broken out with increasing frequency in urban areas, related to the mass relocation of city residents: 820,000 in Beijing from 1991–2000 and 2.5 million in Shanghai since the beginning of the 1990s. This trend has also emerged in rural areas, with many well-known incidents emerging in response to the mass relocation of at least 1.3 million residents in the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.³⁸ With the privatization of public housing in the reform era, an estimated 70% of China's residents nationwide have become homeowners. With this existing level of national homeownership and the continued high-pace development of China's cities and countryside, frequent conflicts of interest between homeowners and developers are certain to emerge. This suggests that unless the regime can find effective legal and institutional mechanisms to curb eviction-related unrest, it will face ongoing land-rights centered threats to social stability heading into the future.

The changing trajectory of protest from a labor focus to a land rights-focus may make it even more difficult for the ruling regime to contain and manage social unrest. This is because land rights issues in many respects may be less prone to segmentation and harder to ameliorate with material and symbolic concessions than industrial worker protests. The issues of land rights are less bound by geographic location; they involve not only urban but also rural

³⁷ Yongshun Cai. "Civil Resistance and Rule of Law in China: The Defense of Homeowners' Rights," in *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China*, eds. Elizabeth Perry and Merle Goldman Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007, 175-176.

³⁸ Sukhan Jackson; Adrian Sleight. "Resettlement for China's Three Gorges Dam: Socio-Economic Impact and Institutional Tensions," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 33:2 (June 2000): 224.

inhabitants; and they are less class-specific, incorporating not only the working poor but also the middle class. Land seizures, both urban and rural, represent a physical loss fundamentally more irreplaceable, and in many ways more emotionally destructive, than losing a factory job might be. Laid-off factory workers can seek and often find replacement jobs. But the loss of a home or family-operated business (*getihu*) typically results in the expulsion of entire families from a well-established and familiar place and community, as well as the loss of equity in which they have invested, often for many years. The sheer emotional and psychological trauma associated with the forced displacement of residents and destruction of their homes has prompted J. Douglas Porteous and Sandra Smith to coin the term “domicide.”³⁹ Its effect, coupled with the region- and class-transcending potential of land rights-based protests, clearly establishes a basis for possible wide-ranging contentious activity. But as discussed in the previous section, this must be effectively framed by enterprising individuals before it can be translated into a meaningful protest movement.

Studies over the past two decades have revealed that in spite of China’s more closed political opportunity structure, certain contentious citizens have aggressively challenged official encroachments upon their property rights. This section highlights the way in which media-savvy, nail-like citizens have become increasingly adept at framing their plights as unjust and appealing to public sympathy to win support for their individual causes. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, while conducting their 1994 fieldwork on rural village elections, learned of the problems presented to local leaders by “nail-like individuals” who stubbornly resisted official action they viewed as unjust. The *dingzi hu* often emerged as organizers of protest actions, varying from small collective actions aimed at local cadres to larger ones, including demonstrations involving thousands of local peasants.⁴⁰

³⁹ J. Douglas Porteous; Sandra E. Smith. *Domicide: the Global Destruction of Home*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001, 12.

⁴⁰ Kevin O’Brien; Lianjiang Li. *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006, xi.

More recently, *dingzi hu* has emerged as a term more closely associated with a situation in which one such “nail-like individual” resists developers and local officials seeking to demolish his/her home.⁴¹ Stories of such nail-houses have become popular topics in the Chinese media, online forums, and day-to-day conversations of Chinese citizens and officials alike. In the most famous nail-house incident to date, a citizen named Wu Ping and her husband, Yang Wu, fought the demolition of their downtown Chongqing home for over three years.⁴² The couple were among 280 households whose homes were slated for demolition in 2004 to make way for an urban redevelopment project involving the construction of luxury apartments. The couple, however, resisted demands that they accept compensation and leave their home, even after their water was cut off in October 2004 and electricity in February 2005. They were still resisting in September 2006,⁴³ by which time the rest of the 280 households had accepted their payments and abandoned the site. Developers soon demolished all the surrounding buildings and excavated the city block, leaving the home of Wu and Yang sitting dramatically atop a teetering 17-meter-high pile of earth in a gaping hole in the middle of Chongqing’s urban center.⁴⁴ As they negotiated for compensation, an apartment in the new complex, and space for the family’s restaurant, the couple began to publicize their plight to

⁴¹ Jeremy Goldkorn. “Property Rights: The Coolest Nail House in History,” *Danwei* [Work unit], March 22, 2007, http://www.danwei.org/bbs/property_rights_the_coolest_na.php, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁴² Howard French. “Homeowner Stares Down Wreckers, at Least for a While,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/27/world/asia/27china.html>, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁴³ Zhang Yue. “What Happened in Those Fifteen Days?” *Southern Weekend*, April 12, 2007, http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20070414_1.htm, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁴⁴ Zhang Rui. “The Inside Investigation of the Chongqing ‘Nail House,’” *ibid.*, March 29, 2007, http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20070401_1.htm, accessed March 29, 2010.

win public sympathy and pressure the developers and local government to yield. Yang Wu, a professional martial artist, broke into the sealed construction site and barricaded himself in their abandoned home. He hoisted a Chinese flag over the three-story house and a handmade banner demanding the protection of citizens' property rights.⁴⁵ Wu Ping began a publicity campaign, repeatedly holding interviews and press conferences with the media; the couple's story soon appeared on national television and in newspapers across the country and abroad, becoming a long-running hot topic in Chinese Internet discourse. Eventually, Wu Ping and Yang Wu accepted compensation, received an apartment elsewhere in Chongqing, ended their protest, and left their home, which shortly thereafter was demolished.⁴⁶

The 2007 Chongqing nail-house incident provides a number of insights into the development of a land rights-centered injustice frame, for several reasons. First, Wu and Yang effectively tapped into a growing sentiment of popular frustration against the frequent seizure of land in urban redevelopment. They applied media-savvy tactics aimed at winning public support and placing pressure on both developers and local government, holding impromptu press conferences and conducting media interviews. They even undertook public relations-friendly stunts, namely Yang Wu's infiltration of the empty house, his placement on it of a Chinese flag, and his display of banners demanding respect for citizens' property rights. These media-friendly tactics used by Wu and Yang suggest that their highly public campaign of resistance was a carefully scripted, well prepared performance aimed at garnering public sympathy, highlighting the unjust behavior of local officials and developers, and winning.

Secondly, the couple, in the mode of O'Brien and Li's "rightful resistance," appealed to public sentiment and legitimized

⁴⁵ Howard French. "Chinese Homeowner Stands Her Ground," *New York Times*, March 26, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/26/world/asia/26iht-house.4.5031385.html>, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁴⁶ "China's 'Nail House' is Pulled Out of its Lonely Site," *ibid.*, April 3, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/03/world/asia/03iht-house.1.5124409.html>, accessed March 29, 2010.

their demands by “fram[ing] their claims with reference to protections implied in ideologies or conferred by policy makers.”⁴⁷ Investigative journalist Zhang Rui discovered reports that Wu Ping had “spent some time reading law books” and even participated in, and won, a lawsuit.⁴⁸ Wu deliberately linked her struggle to laws related to property rights protections, stating at a press conference: “First, I want to defend the dignity of the law; second, I want to defend my own legal rights and interests.”⁴⁹ The couple also made a clear attempt to link their personal struggle to officially recognized property rights protections: the banner Yang Wu hoisted onto their home read, “A citizen's legal property is not to be encroached upon.”⁵⁰

This effort was broadly seen as particularly effective, with the couple ratcheting up their legally framed public relations efforts after the National People’s Congress passed a milestone property law in March 2007. The new law declared, “The property of the state, the collective, the individual and other obligees is protected by law, and no units or individuals may infringe upon it,” formally giving equal protection to state and non-state property.⁵¹ Its passage earlier in the month enabled Wu and Yang to establish their ongoing protest as a test case of the government’s recent assertion of its commitment to property rights, while raising the profile of their struggle. This

⁴⁷ Rightful resistance is defined as “a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public,” O’Brien and Li *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, 2-3.

⁴⁸ Rui. “The Inside Investigation of the Chongqing Nail House.”

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ French. “Chinese Homeowner Stands Her Ground.”

⁵¹ “China's Top Legislature Adopts Landmark Property Law,” *People’s Daily*, March 16, 2007, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200703/16/eng20070316_358242.html, accessed March 29, 2010.

effective framing led Andrew Mertha to suggest that Wu and Yang were so successful at tapping into popular sentiment and emerging rights consciousness in China that they emerged as “folk hero[es]” and represented “a new type of unofficial ‘model citizen’ . . . ordinary individuals willing to hold the state accountable in protecting the private property of its citizens.”⁵²

Finally, Wu and Yang, individuals with urban middle-class origins, represent a new type of educated, media-savvy, charismatic social entrepreneur. As noted by Marc Blecher in his study of the plight of industrial workers, the establishment of market capitalism has tended to “divert away from politics the energies of lively, smart people with leadership potential.” Such individuals tend to fare quite well in finding opportunities for success in the market, leaving them economically oriented and disinterested in leading the most aggrieved segments of society in collective action against an unjust system.⁵³ The involvement of a highly skilled and charismatic couple in such a prolonged, arduous battle with local authorities suggests that well-qualified middle-class individuals, may become drawn into contentious activities by the cross-class threat posed by poorly-regulated land seizures. This suggestion of growing participation by members of the middle class in protests is supported by Chen’s finding that white-collar workers have becoming increasingly active in reported protest incidents. Their involvement rose from only two total reported major incidents before the mid-2000s to 13 in 2007.⁵⁴

The narrative of Wu and Yang’s stubborn resistance against developers resonated throughout much of the Chinese populace, with nail-house stories frequently appearing in Chinese media or being widely circulated throughout the Chinese Internet community. In February 2010, Cheng Laifa, a Shanghai resident, barricaded

⁵² Andrew Mertha. “From ‘Rustless Screws’ to ‘Nail Houses:’ The Evolution of Property Rights in China,” *Orbis* 53:2 (Spring 2009), 234.

⁵³ Blecher “Hegemony and Workers’ Politics in China,” 296.

⁵⁴ Chen, “Growing Social Unrest,” 91.

himself in his home for weeks to resist demolition.⁵⁵ Others have responded with more extreme measures. In Suqian, Jiangsu Province, Wang Maling was convicted of voluntary manslaughter for hacking a worker to death in May 2009 after a dispute over her home, slated for demolition, erupted into violence.⁵⁶ In November 2009, a Shanghai woman named Pan Yang and her husband Zhang Qilong hurled Molotov cocktails from the roof of their home at bulldozers and construction workers attempting to demolish the building. The dramatic scene was caught on camera and circulated widely in the news and online community.

In a number of other instances, desperate citizens even set themselves on fire to draw attention to their plight. In August 2009, police officers approached the house, reportedly built illegally, of a 47-year-old Chengdu resident, Tang Fuzhen, to allow developers access to demolish it. Tang and her relatives responded by throwing Molotov cocktails at the approaching policemen, who retreated. On November 13, when local officials again moved to seize the house from its occupants, Tang appeared on the roof, doused herself with gasoline, and set herself ablaze, dying of her injuries a few days later. On-site video was captured on a mobile phone, and dramatic footage of Tang's self-immolation was soon circulated widely on the Internet, thereafter appearing on television news throughout the country.⁵⁷ In late March, 2010, a Jiangsu farmer, Tao Huixi, and his 92-year-old father set themselves on fire as a demolition crew approached their home, resulting in the death of Tao and the serious injury of his

⁵⁵ Qian Yanfeng. "Shanghai Residents Fight Forced Demolitions," *China Daily*, February 20, 2010, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-02/26/content_9506528.htm, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁵⁶ "Woman Sentenced to Jail for Killing One after House Demolition Dispute," *Xinhua*, February 22, 2010, <http://english.cctv.com/20100222/101040.shtml>, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁵⁷ Huang Zhiling and Liu Weitao. "Burning Issue," *China Daily*, December 18, 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-12/08/content_9136665.htm, accessed March 29, 2010.

father.⁵⁸ Incidents such as these have resonated greatly in Chinese society and have consistently won broad sympathy from the populace. This has led to a recurrent nail-house narrative that often appears in the press or online forums; it invites similarly aggrieved homeowners facing demolition to make public appeals to the general population to halt the destruction of their homes or win greater levels of compensation from developers.

Aside from violent acts of resistance or extreme cases of self-immolation, nail-house resisters have also sought to adopt popular symbols that might draw public and media attention to their causes. One interesting case of the application of such media-savvy tactics appeared upon the release of the James Cameron blockbuster film *Avatar* in China in early 2010. Chinese netizens soon drew a link with *Avatar*'s fantastical tale of greedy corporations uprooting and exploiting the blue Na'vi people of Pandora. One such blogger, Li Chengpeng, saw the film as an allegory for China's nail-house residents who defend their homes against eviction and demolition in urban redevelopment.⁵⁹ Li pointed to Tang Fuzhen, who set herself ablaze in Chengdu, and Pan Rong, the hurler of Molotov cocktails in Shanghai, as examples. Li even whimsically suggested that director James Cameron must have secretly lived in China for years when crafting the storyline.⁶⁰

Li was not alone in drawing such a parallel. Popular novelist and blogger Han Han, noting that the level of "brute-force eviction" in the movie was "unimaginable" outside of China, said this

⁵⁸ "Family of Self-immolation Victims Compensated after House Demolition Dispute," *People's Daily*, April 2, 2010, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/6939248.html>, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁵⁹ Josh Chin. "A Chinese Take on 'Avatar,'" *Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 2010, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2010/01/08/a-chinese-take-on-avatar/>, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁶⁰ Li Chengpeng. "Avatar: An Epic Nail House Textbook," blog entry, posted January 4, 2010, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46e7ba410100gi0g.html, accessed March 29, 2010.

explained its strong appeal to Chinese audiences.⁶¹ Thereafter, *Avatar* references appeared on a banner protesting the demolition of a nail-house in Fanrong Village outside Beijing, reading, “The revelations of *Avatar*: defend your home to your death!”⁶² While the impact of the ongoing *Avatar* controversy on the protest landscape of China has been indeterminate, several significant elements come to mind. First, the adoption of the film, a science fiction fantasy, as an allegorical reference to the plight of nail-house residents, reveals the creativity of Chinese social entrepreneurs in finding powerful cultural resonance for protests in even the most unlikely places. Second, linkages between the film and the nail-house narrative were widely circulated on Internet channels and in the media. When Chinese officials, concerned with *Avatar*’s potential to inspire further land rights-based resistance, attempted to limit the film’s circulation, they were widely defied by both commercially motivated theaters and moviegoers. Third, the strong, wide-ranging resonance of the *Avatar*/nail-house linkage among the Chinese public reveals the depth of the “heroic nail-house resister” narrative. In this narrative, as suggested by Mertha, the citizen who defies developers and officials is a new form of model citizen—an admirable, righteous individual who should be admired for loudly standing up against repression by the powerful. This new nail-house hero challenges and threatens to overturn the traditional state-supported notion of the model citizen, who in the mode of the idealized Lei Feng, is an anonymous, hardworking individual who unswervingly and unquestioningly serves the goals of the Party-state.⁶³

⁶¹ Han Han. “Avatar Makes \$1 Billion Worldwide,” blog entry, posted January 5, 2010, <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/10703014.html>, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁶² ‘Pleasant Living,’ “Avatar Appears as a Protest Slogan,” blog entry, posted February 2, 2010, http://club.china.com/data/thread/1011/2709/41/82/3_1.html, accessed March 29, 2010.

⁶³ Mertha, “From Rustless Screws to Nail Houses: The Evolution of Property Rights in China,” 1.

This essay has suggested that land rights-based protests are an increasingly important feature of the Chinese protest landscape. As suggested by the famous 2007 Chongqing nail-house incident, skilled and media-savvy protest entrepreneurs like Wu Ping and Yang Wu have discovered how to use potentially highly effective tactics. These include highly visible media-friendly stunts, press conferences, and appeals to Chinese property laws that effectively draw public attention and sympathy, pressuring officials and developers into giving in to the protesters' demands. Wu and Yang's example has been followed by other nail-house incidents that sometimes involved extreme resistance tactics, such as attacks with knives, Molotov cocktails, and even self-immolation. These stories have been closely followed in news outlets and on the Internet, with the latter often eluding official attempts to quash stories. The result has been the development of a narrative related to the "heroic nail-house defender," a new kind of model Chinese citizen. Without overstating the situation—a sustained, well-coordinated land rights-based protest movement has clearly not emerged—these cases suggest that such protests involve grievances that transcend locality and social group. These emotionally-charged acts of injustice have been strategically applied by capable, media-savvy protest entrepreneurs. These are the elements of hospitable terrain for wide protest activity. But whether a nascent injustice frame centered on land seizures and home demolitions can be translated into an effective collective action frame and lead to a true protest movement can only be determined by contestation of the frame among competing actors, namely the state, land developers and protest entrepreneurs.