

# Strength and weaknesses of the opposition to the expropriations in rural China

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September 2016

To understand anything about the latest riots in the village of Wukan, you must first understand what the characteristics of land tenure in mainland China are, characterized by the absence of private ownership of land. In essence, it is still based on two forms of ownership, established at the time of the formation of the Maoist state. The first is based on state property. Only the central government can dispose of it. The second is based on collective property. Local authorities can manage them within the areas under their control, the villages forming local bases of the statist pyramid whose summit is based in Beijing. In other words, land is no more commodified than it was in the days of Mao. Nobody can sell or buy it. On the other hand, depending on the extent of their respective powers, the authorities may authorize its use and distribution. In principle, unless authorized by the central government, the authorities in rural areas cannot expel farmers unless they, due to poverty, cannot develop the plots they lease them. Which, with the accelerated expansion of market relations in the countryside happens increasingly in huge proportions. In coastal villages like Wukan, it was not so much the case, at least not to the same extent as today.

The extensive riots of 2011 broke out precisely because the mayor of Wukan, and his associates, with the aim of renting out the fertile and more or less valuable communal land to developers, tried to drive out the villagers, unleashing their particularly brutal militia against them. That's why, in Wukan, as indeed in a lot of other villages in China, they brandished the banner of the fight against corruption as well as the red flag, a symbol of the collective ownership of land in their eyes – an illusion in my opinion – as their last line of defence. In 2011, given that the situation was becoming increasingly tense throughout the whole of Guangdong Province, the birthplace of “market socialism, and that the fierce resistance of Wukan was turning into a symbol, Beijing put pressure on Canton, the seat of the provincial government, to freeze land transactions, remove the mayor, to imprison and torture him, as well as members of his clan, in the special prison in the provincial capital reserved for corrupt local cadres, and to speed up the organization of municipal elections, scheduled by the 1987 law (!) which allowed those who had no party political affiliation to access municipal functions, including that of mayor. So it was Lin Zuluan, who had been appointed by the villagers to negotiate with Canton, presented by

our democrats as “the leader of the revolt,” who ascended to the post and tried, from there, to domesticate the goat and the cabbage.

Today it is the same Lin Zuluang who is on trial for corruption in Canton and, of course, in the tradition of the Moscow trials and those of Beijing, has confessed to his “crimes.” I do not know to what extent he has “dipped his long chopsticks in the soup,” as the Cantonese put it. For those who know China and the mores of the members of the current “celestial bureaucracy”, from the bottom to the top of the pyramid, it would not be surprising. Anyway, the repression that strikes Wukan today is not contingent. The central government and all the bureaucrats involved in the provinces have decided to end the policy regarding concessions to those people they found difficult to deal with, who had tried to set up the previous team residing in the vicinity of the Forbidden City. As stated by the current Secretary General of the Party, during his inauguration speech on “market socialism”, there is certainly a “market”, but especially “socialism.” In other words, unrelenting coercion applied to all individuals who do not accept the yoke. Wukan was, somehow, the symbol of “local democracy” concomitant to the previous phase of “market socialism”. Which resulted, as elsewhere after a few years, in the ruin and accelerated impoverishment of hundreds of thousands of villagers. This led Lin Zuluang to sell communal land, already vacant or about to be, to developers, including those originating from Hong Kong, very close. It is against the resumption of such expropriations, where the role of the corruption of local officials from Wukan may have been negligible, that the villagers protested, more radically, at least in terms of form, because in terms of content the same limits, based on the defence of collective ownership and the red flag, quickly emerged. Sometimes associated with portraits of the Great Helmsman. In this sense, the mayor, Lin Zuluang, seemed to the villagers as the guarantor of the status quo. But the status quo is no longer a possibility for the state. The steamroller of “market socialism” is freewheeling ahead to crush the least resistance. Such is Beijing’s current objective. Wukan acted as a symbol of the earlier precarious compromise. So Wukan must be annihilated. We’ll see in the near future, in Wukan and elsewhere, if the wretched of the Earth in China can break with their own illusions and end the Chinese version of statist ideology which has been hampering them for generations.

*Lao She (Old Snake), September 2016*

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