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Value Clashes, Power Competition and Community Trust:

Why an NGO's Earthquake Recovery Program Faltered in Rural China

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Abstract: NGOs in rural China cannot operate successfully and achieve their goals if they lose the trust of the people they aim to serve and the grassroots leaders they must work with. Following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, an environmental NGO in P village became entangled in competition with village cadres and value clashes with villagers who had their own understanding of development, sustainability and environmentalism. Initially, “borrowed power” from higher-level governments enabled the ENGO to enter the community fairly smoothly and to gain a degree of trust, but disputes with villagers (over home construction, organic agriculture and eco-tourism) and a power struggle with local cadres (over their role in the village) triggered resistance that ultimately drove the ENGO out. The story of P village is a cautionary tale about power relationships and community micropolitics. “Borrowed power” from above is no match for opposition from below on two fronts. Sadly, however, “success” in expelling the ENGO has not meant success more broadly. P village’s economic performance remains weak and old divisions between the powerful and powerless have re-emerged, as lack of trust in outsiders has been replaced with a lack of trust in insiders.

Value Clashes, Power Competition and Community Trust:

Why an NGO's Earthquake Recovery Program Faltered in Rural China

On 12 May 2008, Sichuan province, China experienced a catastrophic earthquake.

Wenchuan was the most stricken county, and much of the surrounding area was also devastated.

The suffering caused by the quake was enormous: around 87,000 people were killed, more than

374,000 were injured, and economic losses approached US\$125 billion (Liu, Wang and Dang

2018). The disaster also reduced the local government's ability to carry out its work, not least

because many officials were killed or injured, and many government buildings collapsed or

became unusable. In Hanwang town, Mianzhu city, for example, nearly every state worker was

buried in the rubble and perished. In Beichuan county, the Bureau of Civil Affairs building fell in

on itself and only five officials survived (Sichuan News Network 2018). Following this ruinous

loss of staff and capacity, the affected area had little choice but to rely on external assistance to

begin, and push forward, recovery (Xu 2017, 38-43).

This created an opportunity for civil society organizations to step in and provide help (Teets

2009; Liu, Wang and Dang 2018; Liu and Wang, 2019). Many NGOs appeared on the scene and

undertook work that would probably not have been permitted just a few months before.

According to Zhu and Chen (2009), more than 300 domestic and international NGOs came to

Sichuan after 2008 and took part in disaster relief. Other NGOs, though not active on the ground,

aided in reconstruction from afar. The best estimates suggest that about three million volunteers played a role in the area's recovery (Zhu and Chen 2009).¹ The year 2008 marked a new high for non-state action in China, and villages and towns affected by the earthquake became a training ground for NGOs and a laboratory for experimentation (Zhang 2008).

A Beijing-based organization we will call EcoLiving was among the region's most active NGOs. An advocacy group founded in the mid-1990s, EcoLiving was a pioneer in initiating programs related to environmental education. It produced a weekly television show devoted to environmental protection and successfully campaigned for trash sorting, higher temperature settings on air conditioners, and the creation of "green communities." It also worked to raise awareness of the environmental risks of chemical production and was an environmental consultant for the 2008 Olympic Games. EcoLiving's successes had won it a number of domestic honors, including a best NGO award and a Top Ten Think Tank award, as well as several international prizes. By the time the 2008 earthquake occurred, EcoLiving's mission was clear, its leadership was experienced, well-regarded and confident, and the NGO had a strong, value-driven identity as one of China's leading voices for environmental protection and sustainable development.

¹ A comprehensive account of volunteers who arrived to help can be found in Xu (2017).

As a prominent and respected NGO with a strong track record, EcoLiving secured 3.65 million yuan (approximately US\$530,000) from the Chinese Red Cross immediately after the earthquake, which was a substantial sum for a Chinese NGO. Flush with this support, EcoLiving staff raced to P village and initiated a program we will call “Harmonious Land.” P village, a small hamlet of just over 800 people, had been heavily damaged in the earthquake. It is located deep in the Qinglong mountains and boasts beautiful vistas, fresh air, and cool summers. For EcoLiving, P village was an opportunity to try to bring its ideas about environmentalism and sustainable development to life.

The goals of the Harmonious Land program were breathtakingly ambitious. They centered on six aspects of development, including building homes, boosting incomes, maintaining and improving public health, protecting the environment, promoting self-governance, and encouraging ethical living, all of which were to be pursued in an ecological and democratic way. Through the program, Ecoliving’s leadership sought to fashion a new village that was “collectively powerful” (*jiti ziqiang*), “individually autonomous” (*geren zizhu*), “ecologically natural” (*shengtai ziran*), “ethically disciplined” (*daode zilǚ*), and “proud of its rural nature” (*xiangcun zihao*).² In short, the Harmonious Land program entailed a comprehensive transformation of village life.

² These goals were laid out in a speech delivered by EcoLiving’s director on 12 May 2009, the first anniversary of the earthquake.

During its first three years in the village, EcoLiving's freedom to act was nearly as sweeping as its vision.³ The Ecological Association of P village (EAP) was established to represent villagers' interests and oversee the NGOs activities. But EAP was originated by EcoLiving and its registered fund of 30,000 yuan (about US\$4400) came wholly from EcoLiving's coffers. For the association's leaders, let alone its other members, terms like "environmental protection" (*huanbao*) or "ecology" (*shengtai*) were unfamiliar and none of them had any experience working with an NGO. As a result, EAP did not act as an independent supervisor that could rein EcoLiving in when it went off track. In the first few years after the earthquake, the local political elite—cadres on the village committee and the Communist Party (the Party hereafter) branch—were also sidelined, because most of the grants to carry out Harmonious Land were secured by EcoLiving, and the NGO's director, Miao, and her staff members believed they had the right to make most decisions by themselves.⁴ Equally important, nearly all the residents of P village, after applauding Miao for spearheading the building of a new paved road, quickly lost faith in EcoLiving's competence, vision and good intentions and turned against it. Five years after it arrived, EcoLiving's reputation was damaged beyond repair, and grassroots cadres and disillusioned villagers pushed it out of the village.

³ For other, more bottom-up understandings of environmentalism, see Martinez-Alter (2004).

⁴ Miao is a pseudonym.

The failure of Harmonious Land is a testament to the importance of community trust for NGOs that are seeking to reshape (or even have any impact on) rural society. It is hardly news to say that NGOs in China cannot survive without the backing or at least the tolerance of the state.⁵ If Beijing or local authorities lose faith in an NGO, the government can strangle the organization financially, regulate it onerously, or shut it down.⁶ What has been less well appreciated is that to operate successfully a Chinese NGO must not lose the trust of the community it seeks to serve, including the people it aims to help and the grassroots leaders it must work with.⁷ In an authoritarian rural setting, community trust is just as important as trust from above, if social change is an NGO's goal.

In China, NGOs, especially value-driven ones, are often quite isolated from the villages they target for change and typically have little experience dealing with the social actors they encounter in the countryside. To carry out a long-term program and realize their ideals—always a

⁵ Building trust with the government and partnering with it is crucial for Chinese NGOs (C. Hsu 2010; J. Hsu 2012; Hsu and Hasmath 2017, 23, 34-35; Tam and Hasmath, 2015, 291; Hasmath and Hsu 2014, 945-48; Spires 2011; Teets 2014; Menefee and Nordtveit 2012, 604). So is establishing close ties with state authorities (Spires, Tao and Chan 2014, 80). If individual officials trust NGO leaders that can spill over to the NGO itself, at least in the short term (Hildebrandt 2013, 142-44, 150-54; Heurlin 2016, 92). Yang and Alpermann (2014, 328-29) suggest that maintaining good relations with the state is a sine qua non for Chinese NGOs, though less so for those with clear institutional standing and a fully legal status.

⁶ The fortunes of Chinese NGOs “oscillate” depending on state behavior (Tam and Hasmath 2015, 286; also Spires 2011; Hsieh 2016; Stern and O'Brien 2012, 178-80).

⁷ Liu, Wang and Dang (2018) and Liu and Wang (2019) have conducted pioneering research on NGO-community relations in other Sichuan villages after the earthquake. Teets (2009, 331, 338) also notes the importance of building trust with the community.

difficult task in the best of circumstances—NGO leaders usually have to rely on personal relationships with officials at higher levels who can designate a venue for project implementation. With this endorsement from above, NGOs can sometimes enter rural communities successfully (Newland 2018) and at least for a short time may enjoy support from the rural community they have been “assigned” to help. During this initial period, disagreements may be papered over and conflicts between the NGO, village leaders and villagers may seem to disappear. But with the passage of time, trust and “borrowed power” (Kayden 1990; Ziff and Rao 1997; Pettitt 2009) from above is seldom enough, and a NGOs inability to navigate the everyday politics of a village, including class and other divisions that preceded the arrival of the NGO, can doom an NGO’s efforts to failure.

How to generate and maintain trust is a challenge for civil society organizations everywhere. When an NGO carries out a project in rural China, it must deal with at least two main constituencies: villagers and village leaders. For most ordinary villagers,⁸ the economic payoffs and sustainability of a project are most important, while grassroots cadres often pay greatest attention to whether their authority and interests will be undermined by an NGO’s “intrusion.” As for value-driven NGOs, political, economic and environmental transformation

⁸ This term elides important differences that exist within many villages. In some circumstances, lineage leaders, factory owners, and better-off entrepreneurs are additional parties to be considered. In P village, however, the key actors were cadres on one side and villagers on the other.

are paramount, as they seek to create a more “civilized” (*wenming*), environmentally-conscious and democratic way of life. But their efforts to put their beliefs and goals into practice frequently generate value clashes with rural people, not least because the views of many ENGO activists often lean toward “a cult of wilderness” and the “gospel of eco-efficiency,” rather than a more locally-grounded, less self-conscious “environmentalism of the poor” (Martinez-Alier 2004) that pays attention to livelihood needs and more traditional values and ways of protecting the environment (Martinez-Alier 2009). Trying to impose alien ideas on a community while not delivering on economic payoffs is a formula for loss of trust and failure.

Beyond villagers who keep a close eye on the bottom line and have their own perspective on sustainable development and nature, NGOs in rural China also have to interact with grassroots cadres, who are highly attuned to disruptions of the local power structure and their place within it. In particular, when an NGO is well-connected to the central government and brought to a community by officials at higher levels, village cadres are placed in an awkward situation. On one hand, they must play along with their superiors and act cooperatively, at least during the early stages of a project when their superiors are paying close attention. They must, in other words, exhibit trust and support, even if it is not as genuine as it appears. On the other hand, acceptance of an NGO tends to dissipate if an NGO cannot retain the power it has borrowed from above and village cadres cannot get some credit for the NGO’s achievements. Being forced to dissemble at the outset, and then being tempted to engage in a power struggle

and legitimacy contest as the years go by, makes village cadres at best unreliable partners for an NGO, and sometimes outright rivals.

In this article we will focus on EcoLiving's project practices by foregrounding rural voices and highlighting tensions and a "trust deficit"⁹ (Teets 2009, 331) that grew with villagers and grassroots leaders in the wake of the earthquake. The story is one of mistakes made, personality clashes and a measure of arrogance by EcoLiving, but even more a mismatch in expectations and concerns that perhaps could not have been finessed. As a value-driven NGO, EcoLiving was handcuffed by its organizational mission, and better listening would not have solved many of the problems it faced. Throughout this study, we aim to cast light on the micropolitics of China's villages and to speak to the experience of other NGOs that have entered the Chinese countryside to take on disaster relief, poverty alleviation, community development, care of the elderly, left-behind children and orphans, and the quality of rural schools and health care. Our larger goal is to highlight tensions that can emerge when community trust does not exist or is squandered, and to show that "downward accountability" (Edwards and Hulme 1996; Andrews 2014; Kilby 2006; Unerman and O'Dwyer 2010) is not a cure-all if serious value clashes exist. We also examine an array of tactics, both hidden and open, that disillusioned villagers and grassroots cadres used to

⁹ Surveys show that public trust for NGOs declined in the 2000s after rising in the 1990s. Interestingly, environmental NGOs are the most trusted of all NGOs in China and the Wenchuan earthquake pushed trust up significantly (Heurlin 2016).

undermine support for the NGO with higher levels of government, and to drive EcoLiving out.

That ultimately nearly all of the residents of P village lost confidence in the role that NGOs could play in rural development and instead felt heightened trust in the village leadership is an ironic coda to EcoLiving's difficult time in P village.

To understand the failure and eventual shutdown of the Harmonious Land program, the first author and her students conducted fieldwork in the region in May 2013, August 2016, and July-August 2019, along with a number of telephone interviews in June 2013. In 2013, members of the research team visited the offices of Harmonious Land in P village and spoke with 37 informants,¹⁰ including 22 rank-and-file villagers, four EAP leaders, five EcoLiving staff, four village cadres, and two township officials. In August 2016, the first author took part in a small public works project in P village, which was carried out by a new NGO operated locally by several EcoLiving staff members who had been stationed in the village. From late July to early August 2019, the research team returned to P village and conducted 78 interviews, with most informants we met in 2013 interviewed again. In this round of fieldwork, we took the story of P village and EcoLiving forward six years, in order to better understand the post-history of the Harmonious Land program and what the village's development strategy currently is and who is behind it. Our newest fieldwork provided, among other things, a more nuanced perspective on

¹⁰ Some informants were interviewed twice. In total, we did 41 interviews in 2013.

long-term outcomes and old divisions that can reappear after an external actor withdraws. As with all interviews, perspectives varied, self-serving comments were common, and we had to triangulate between informants to uncover what transpired, while also recognizing that misperceptions also mattered. In addition to our interviews, we collected written materials, including official documents related to the program and media reports about it.

From Cooperation to Distrust: Power Competition and Growing Tensions with Village Cadres

EcoLiving, because of its visibility and reputation for advocacy, was at first warmly welcomed by local officials and village cadres. The county head and the Party secretary of J town were enthusiastic when they appeared on television right after the earthquake, with the Party secretary excitedly saying: “I’ve been longing for a collaborator like EcoLiving ‘day and night’ (*pan xingxing, pan yueliang*) and now I have found someone like Director Miao who shares my vision.” The county head also generously underwrote EcoLiving in the early stages of Harmonious Land. When he saw how hard Miao and the villagers were working to repair the road from J town, he promised, on the spot, to use public funds to pay for an upgraded asphalt surface. All the village cadres whom we interviewed believed that EcoLiving had strong backing beyond the county level. They considered Miao a celebrity, at home and abroad, who could reach officials at the province or even in Beijing. In these circumstances, EcoLiving enjoyed

extraordinary privileges and autonomy, owing to the power it borrowed, real or imagined, from higher level authorities. It acted accordingly, regularly adopting a confident and assertive stance in front of village cadres and villagers.

Support from above, though invaluable, was fleeting. This occurred not only because officials often “move quickly up the promotion ladder” (Newland 2018, 24), but also because many lose interest in a pet project once they move on to the next new initiative (O’Brien and Li 1999; Cai 2004, 25; Newland 2018). When our research team first visited P village in May 2013, an EcoLiving staff member explained that town and county leaders at that time only backed the NGO and Harmonious Land in words, not action.¹¹ The vice director of EAP agreed: “Leaders champion us when they are interviewed by journalists, but afterwards they pay us no attention at all.”¹² To staff on the ground, the reason for this was obvious: “At first, the authorities had great, even unrealistic, hopes about what we would do. They considered an organization like ours to be influential and a magnet for resources, even possibly transfers from the central government. When we failed to meet their expectations, they gradually lost confidence in us.”¹³

Village cadres, as the immediate crisis faded, became increasingly hostile to EcoLiving and its work.¹⁴ During the first phase of Harmonious Land, when their superiors were still

¹¹ Interview 28 with an EcoLiving staff member working in P village, 19 May 2013.

¹² Interview 14 with the vice director of EAP, 18 May 2013.

¹³ Interview 28 with an EcoLiving staff member working in P village, 19 May 2013.

¹⁴ Local governments elsewhere in Sichuan also distrusted the intentions of civil society associations after the earthquake (Teets 2009, 2014, 137-38). Chinese local officials often fear

enthusiastic and they needed all the help they could get, village cadres were willing to collaborate with EcoLiving, sometimes even eagerly.¹⁵ But they soon found themselves in conflict with the NGO on many issues and began to believe that the presence of EcoLiving in their village undercut their authority, and brought them few benefits and potential trouble.

First, village cadres felt that the distribution of profits was unfair. EcoLiving, with its big reputation and plentiful borrowed power at the outset, took an uncompromising position on how to distribute financial benefits from the program. The contract signed by EcoLiving, EAP, and the village committee stipulated: “Since Party One (EcoLiving) contributes planning, funding, managing, and marketing to the Harmonious Land program, and Party Two (EAP) invests land, labor and some management, the ratio of ownership and profit sharing between Party One and Party Two is 51/49. Meanwhile, Party One will contribute 3% of its shares to set up a ‘Fund for Public Interest’ in order to support financially-needy and other disadvantaged members of the village. Party Three (the Village Committee) is not awarded shares or profits, but may accrue benefits according to its contribution to the development of the program, which should be used to improve public services in P village.” This ownership structure and division of profits excluded the village committee and the Party branch entirely, and was resented greatly by the local political elite. The Party secretary of P village believed that, as an NGO, EcoLiving should not

that “the presence of NGOs erodes their own power and authority by substituting civil society for local governments” (Heurlin 2016, 92).

¹⁵ Interview 28 with an EcoLiving staff member working in P village, 19 May 2013.

make any profits from Harmonious Land. Even if some money-making was defensible, the NGO had not convinced him why it deserved 51% of the earnings from eco-tourism, organic agriculture, and a health clinic that the NGO had set up. In his opinion, EcoLiving mainly contributed its “philosophy” (*linian*), and though it also brought in outside donations, it did that in the name of the village EAP and that should not be counted as an investment by the NGO. When interviewed in 2013, he remained unpersuaded (and even angry) that EcoLiving was taking such a large share of the profits, when the village, with its natural resources and human capital, had invested so much more.¹⁶

Second, village cadres were extremely dissatisfied because they were excluded from the EAP’s governance structure and the decision-making process related to the village’s development.¹⁷ Members of the village committee and the Party branch were not allowed to compete for positions on the EAP, since EcoLiving insisted that the association should be independent from all grassroots political organizations. EcoLiving believed that if the local elite was in charge or had too much say, the association would become meaningless,¹⁸ while the

¹⁶ Interview 34 with the Party secretary of P village, 20 May 2013.

¹⁷ According to Menefee and Nordtveit (2012, 605), political sensitivities were greatest in the most devastated areas, where “If you come in and do something the government is not doing, it can look like you’re challenging them.”

¹⁸ Interview 15 with EcoLiving’s local program chief in P village, 18 May 2013. Elsewhere in Sichuan, NGOs set up their own management team for village cooperatives and prohibited current village cadres from being director “in order to prevent over-centralization of power” (Liu, Wang and Dang 2018, 54).

village's Party secretary returned the favor by calling EAP EcoLiving's "puppet" (*kuilei*).¹⁹ At the same time, village cadres disliked EcoLiving for making decisions without consulting them. For example, the Party secretary said that he was seldom informed about farming initiatives or group visits by volunteers, students, NGO fellows and scholars, because EcoLiving believed it could act on its own if it raised the money for a project or activity.²⁰ A member of the village committee explained why he felt slighted with a homely analogy: "As a guest, saying hello to the master should come first. You can't just be an intruder in my house and do whatever you want."²¹ Like many villagers, as time passed, grassroots cadres also came to question EcoLiving's competence and vision. The village committee director felt that Miao was an "idealist" (*lixiang zhuyi zhe*) cut out only for teaching rather than practical work. He compared her to a bird flying in the sky, while villagers were caterpillars crawling on the ground.²²

Finally, some village cadres felt that EcoLiving created political risks for them. For example, in 2012, EcoLiving hosted a conference in P village attended by many NGOs. The leadership of the village was only told about this potentially sensitive event at the last minute.²³

Some of EcoLiving's projects also involved legally-questionable land use and the risk of

¹⁹ Interview 34 with the Party secretary of P village, 20 May 2013.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview 27 with a village cadre who served as P village's accountant, 19 May 2013.

²² Interview 1 with the director of the P village committee, 17 May and 18 May 2013. Other NGO managers in the quake zone were also viewed as too "bookish" and lacking in the government experience and connections necessary to be successful (Sorace 2017, 126).

²³ Interview 34 with the Party secretary of P village, 20 May 2013.

business failure. If something went awry, the village Party secretary believed that the village committee and the Party branch, rather than EcoLiving, would be held responsible.²⁴ Worse still, all the grassroots cadres interviewed lamented that Miao frequently told officials at higher levels that the village leadership did not support her work. On at least one occasion, the village Party secretary claimed that inspectors from the county organizational department came to P village to investigate him as a result of Miao's reporting. Discord, Miao's backdoor conversations with higher-ups, broken lines of communication, value clashes, an ongoing power struggle, and the reluctance of village leaders to work with EcoLiving were an open secret by the time we arrived in the village in 2013.²⁵

EcoLiving's actions in P village contrast with some other post-earthquake villages in Sichuan, where NGOs partnered effectively with the local government and persuaded grassroots cadres that they did not "wish to serve as a substitute for local government, but a complement to it" (Teets 2009, 331). An important difference in our case is that EcoLiving was a high-status NGO that had been authorized by top-level officials to carry out a comprehensive, long-term program. Because EcoLiving had strong support from above, village cadres displayed respect and cooperated with the NGO at the outset. Believing their borrowed power was greater and more secure than it was, EcoLiving regularly pushed the envelope and bypassed local leaders,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Interview 9 with a P village team leader, 18 May 2013; Interview 27 with a village cadre who served as P village's accountant, 19 May 2013.

thereby losing their trust, both real and feigned. As the NGOs high-level backers lost interest or rotated out of office, village cadres gradually became more reluctant to cooperate because they did not believe that EcoLiving was valuing the essential role local leaders played in village life.

Value Clashes and Declining Trust of Villagers

Unlike grassroots cadres, villagers in P village cared more about practical issues, economic development and their lived environment than about power struggles between village leaders and the NGO. When EcoLiving was supported by higher-level officials and persuaded the county to pave a much-needed asphalt road from J town to P village, almost all the residents we interviewed praised EcoLiving for this accomplishment and expressed trust in the NGO. Some of them even gave up an opportunity to move to apartments in J town and chose to stay in P village to join in the Harmonious Land program. In the early years, most people were extremely hospitable to EcoLiving staff members, for example inviting them to dinner if they were cooking something particularly tasty. Villagers also pushed to shut down two limestone pits that posed a threat to Miao's dream to develop eco-tourism. But the honeymoon between the NGO and its clients was short, and tensions soon began to rise.

Some of the conflict between EcoLiving and the residents of P village parallel those Liu, Wang and Dang (2018) discovered in post-disaster reconstruction elsewhere in Sichuan: villagers wished to attend to their immediate needs first, were unfailingly pragmatic, and preferred private

initiatives, while NGOs focused on long-term development and favored collective ventures. But the distinctive features of the Harmonious Land program and EcoLiving's identity as a progressive, environmental organization also brought additional problems associated with trust and conflicting goals and values to the surface.²⁶

Value clashes first appeared over the critical issue of rebuilding homes. Shortly after the earthquake, EcoLiving invited several renowned architects to submit designs that relied mainly on bamboo siding. The proposal that was chosen, though cost-efficient and environmentally-friendly, was not welcomed by most villagers.²⁷ Their priorities were durability and size, while woodland conservation (as understood by EcoLiving) did not figure greatly in their calculations. P village's location in remote, heavily-forested mountains meant that most households had their own wood lots that could provide more than enough building materials. Forest conservation as imagined by EcoLiving's urban-born staff was felt to miss the point and be disrespectful of villagers who might build a home once or twice in a lifetime but were surrounded by hectares of woodlands that would regenerate relatively quickly. Furthermore, the building materials

²⁶ Guobin Yang (2005) provides a thorough discussion of the main types of Chinese environmental NGOs and their collective action repertoires, interactions with the state, and early history.

²⁷ Elsewhere in Sichuan, villagers resisted "architects' romantic ideas of the countryside and how it should look," and instead preferred "modern," efficient designs that maximized space (Liu, Wang and Dang 2018, 52). Commissioning world-renowned architects was common throughout the affected area (Sorace 2017, 110).

suggested by EcoLiving’s architects struck many people as flimsy and likely to wear out soon,²⁸ and the idea that a house should be small and not occupy too much land did not resonate for families who wanted their new homes to be spacious. Owing to a flood of complaints from villagers, EcoLiving eventually gave in and let people build their residences as they wished, using local lumber and wood siding, rather than bamboo panels.²⁹ EcoLiving did score one success in persuading most residents not to use bricks or cement in construction, owing to the risk of another earthquake.

Villagers and EcoLiving also clashed on the area’s potential for tourism. Local people typically thought that their community had no attractions and that much needed to be built to draw visitors to their remote location. Villagers were particularly excited about constructing entertainment parlors. But the local program director of EcoLiving argued: “Miao is an environmentalist. She favors natural and ecological beauty. She doesn’t like to see trees and

²⁸ Time has proved correct the villagers who, in accord with the “environmentalism of the poor” questioned the suitability of the building materials recommended by the big-city architects. Unlike most private homes, public buildings were constructed according to EcoLiving’s design. Within a few years, most of them were in poor condition and many were unusable. Although it might have appeared early on that villagers did not care much about sustainability and the long term, they understood their humid climate, forest resources, and land use options better than EcoLiving. Villagers had “an intimate experience of living close to nature,” much to lose from poor decisions, and “an intrinsic motivation to be careful managers of the environment” (Davey 2009, 1, 4).

²⁹ Other Sichuan villagers in the quake zone successfully resisted an NGO’s efforts to get them to build new homes in a designated area and altered design details as they pleased (Liu and Wang, 2019; Liu, Wang and Dang 2018, 51-53). Such “everyday modifications” (Kerkvliet 2009, 238) are not conventional resistance, but can change outcomes.

flowers artificially planted. . . We welcome people to come here to taste the wild herbs. And the fresh air is your biggest advantage. If people want to see flowers, they shouldn't come. They should go to the city.”³⁰ Another EcoLiving staff member noted the contrasting views that NGO staff and villagers held about tourism: “Villagers couldn't understand eco-tourism. They thought that tourists coming up here would want to play mahjong, sing karaoke, and go fishing. But our organization is after a different market. For those who want to enjoy the things I just mentioned, we would say: ‘Sorry, you're not our clients.’”³¹

P villagers did not favor the “organic agriculture” (*youji nongye*) model adopted by EcoLiving either. The NGO was a strong supporter of all-natural farming, but nearly all local residents thought it was unrealistic, not least because consumers in the cities would not believe that P village's cabbage, corn and potatoes were truly organic and be willing to pay more for them.³² There were also doubts, expressed by people whose families had typically lived in the village for generations, about whether organic production could succeed, given P village's climate and mountainous location. Generally low temperatures and little arable land per

³⁰ Interview 15 with EcoLiving's local program chief in P village, 18 May 2013.

³¹ Interview 28 with an EcoLiving member staff working in P village, 19 May 2013. “Fishing” in this passage referred to farmed fish.

³² Interview 1 with the director of the P village committee, 17 May and 18 May 2013; Interview 9 with a team leader of P village, 18 May 2013; Interview 14 with the vice director of EAP, 18 May 2013. Yasuda (2018, chap. 5) explains that trust is an important element of the success of community-supported agriculture and that Chinese consumers are willing to pay a considerable amount if they are convinced their food is safe. In the word of one producer (Yasuda 2018, 79), “I don't sell vegetables, I sell trust.”

household meant that output was already low. For villagers, requiring them to eschew chemical fertilizer and pesticides and take a risk on low-yield organic vegetables and fruits was too much, in an area where they had not even been able to attain the lower “pollution-free” (*wu gonghai*)³³ standard. For most people in P village, EcoLiving’s environmentalism was ill-informed, overly concerned with wilderness and fashionable ideas that were inappropriate in their circumstances (see Martinez-Alier 2004). Moreover, they believed it was unsustainable rather than sustainable. Like others who practice “the environmentalism of the poor,” most people in P village worried that this type of “development” could well make them poorer rather than richer, and more vulnerable to a physical environment they knew far better than EcoLiving.

Finally, villagers considered the communal, self-governance model promoted by EcoLiving to be time-consuming and impractical. They could not understand why there were so many meetings and complained that they had families to raise, while also noting that they were often excluded from discussing decisions that would change their village greatly.³⁴ Many villagers were also disappointed that participation in EAP’s affairs was uncompensated: “There is no salary or subsidy for doing work for the Association. Villagers have to make a living, and if you follow Miao and help her achieve her goals, how can you earn your bread? Who wants to be a

³³ Interview 1 with the director of the P village committee, 17 May and 18 May 2013.

³⁴ Interview 3 with a villager from P village, 17 May 2013. The need to work can interfere with an NGO’s efforts to pursue “accountability dialogues” (Unerman and O’Dwyer 2010, 484).

volunteer?”³⁵ The vice director of EAP flatly declared that the self-governance program and emphasis on cooperation and mutual effort was unsuitable for the countryside: “She imagined villagers living together like students, going to school together, getting out of class and heading for the canteen, but that doesn’t work in a village.”³⁶

Deep value clashes were intensified by practical factors. First of all, EcoLiving’s organizational capacity was not strong enough to turn its vision and goals into reality, which made people in P village reluctant to believe in the ideals promoted by the NGO. EcoLiving never had more than twenty full-time employees, and with several projects underway at the same time, staff were rotated frequently whenever an urgent need arose elsewhere. This harmed implementation and made the NGO appear disorganized.³⁷ Second, except for financial support from the Chinese Red Cross to help rebuild homes, EcoLiving depended mainly on donations that were small or short in duration, and this left villagers with an impression that the NGO was unreliable because it “organized this today and that tomorrow, but almost all the activities were just one-time affairs.”³⁸ Finally, owing to limited demand for eco-tourism, the Harmonious Land program made little if any profit most years. This meant that villagers did not derive meaningful benefits from the program. One villager lamented in May 2013: “We’ve only received dividends

³⁵ Interview 17 with a villager from P village, 18 May 2013.

³⁶ Interview 14 with the vice director of EAP, 18 May 2013.

³⁷ Interview 28 with an EcoLiving staff member working in P village, 19 May 2013; Interview 36 with EcoLiving’s longest-serving staff member in P village, 20 June 2013.

³⁸ Interview 6 with a villager from P village, 18 May 2013.

twice since 2008. The first time we got 18 yuan (US\$3), the second time 50 yuan per person, and that's it. How can we live on that amount of money?"³⁹ As a result of these limited benefits, many villagers concluded that the type of environmentalism EcoLiving promoted, including values such as eco-tourism and organic farming, was "deceptive."⁴⁰

Popular disenchantment grew as EcoLiving failed to deliver on most of its promises, and villagers concluded that the NGO was inept. This only got worse when Miao began dodging contact with community members. In the words of one villager, "She refused to 'meet the masses' (*jian qunzhong*)."⁴¹ Another added: "She got the money, and then didn't even care about casting a glance at us."⁴² Some residents of P village complained that after 2011 EcoLiving's staff stopped calling on villagers to celebrate Chinese New Year together.⁴³ One said that the NGO was just "letting the village run its course" (*rangni zisheng zimie*).⁴⁴ The three EcoLiving staff we interviewed regarded the fault-finding and loss of trust by villagers to be unwarranted. A man who had worked in P village for several years said that he was exhausted and frustrated: "We are after all outsiders, but we are responsible for everything. No matter what the problem is,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid; Interview 9 with a P village team leader, 18 May 2013.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Interview 5 with a villager from P village, 18 May 2013.

⁴³ Interview 6 with a villager from P village, 18 May 2013.

⁴⁴ Interview 24 with the wife of a leader of EAP, 18 May 2013.

villagers blame us, not village cadres.”⁴⁵ The NGO’s local program chief even considered EcoLiving “more of a village committee than the village committee” (*bi cunweihui hai cunweihui*). She said they had done their job well and villagers should not be depending on them to bring development to the village. She noted, with more than a little irritation: “I often tell them to move on themselves instead of always waiting for us. If you don’t do things by yourselves, what can we do? It’s like raising a kid. We have to let go when the child can walk. Now the village has infrastructure. With a paved road from the town and all the homes rebuilt, it’s time for you to act.”⁴⁶

Trust Deficit, Community Resistance, and the Retreat of EcoLiving

When village cadres saw both trust from above (i.e. superiors) and trust from below (i.e. villagers) declining, they recognized this offered an opportunity to challenge EcoLiving. The P village leadership, with the support of many residents, used three main tactics to undermine EcoLiving. At first, when they were still in a weak position, village leaders avoided head-on confrontation and relied on “moving the masses.” Later, they turned to more direct forms of opposition, including erecting bureaucratic roadblocks and disrupting Harmonious Land projects.

⁴⁵ Interview 36 with an EcoLiving staff member who had been working in P village for several years, 18 June 2013.

⁴⁶ Interview 15 with EcoLiving’s local program chief in P village, 18 May 2013. Officials and documents about recovery from the earthquake often referred to the “traditional peasant mentality” of “waiting, depending and demanding” (*deng, kao, yao*) (Sorace 2017, 101).

Finally, they engaged in open conflict and used administrative and popular pressure to drive EcoLiving out of P village.

The strategy of “moving the masses” (Perry 2002) is frequently employed in China to tackle thorny problems, such as getting higher-level officials to pay attention to a locality’s interests (Li and Liu 2016; Ma 2019) or persuading residents to vacate their homes so that urban renewal can take place (Deng 2017). For most of the time that EcoLiving operated in P village, village cadres were not in a position to act on their misgivings openly. They disapproved of EcoLiving and wanted it out, but had to maneuver behind the scenes, because they worried that Miao might report them to county and municipal leaders who “backed her” and “pulled strings for her.”⁴⁷ Sometimes, village cadres resorted to tools more commonly used by the powerless (Scott 1985), including going through the motions, saying one thing but doing another, and gossiping. Owing to kinship ties with many villagers, grassroots cadres could spread rumors readily and speak ill of Miao and Harmonious Land. Villagers were often told that EcoLiving’s projects were certain to fail, that the NGO had used their village’s plight to make off with a large amount of money, and that Miao was arrogant, overly-assertive and a “tattletale.”⁴⁸ As a result, at least to some extent,

⁴⁷ Interview 27 with a village cadre who served as P village’s accountant, 19 May 2013.

⁴⁸ Interview 9 with a P village team leader, 18 May 2013; Interview 27 with a village cadre who served as P village’s accountant, 19 May 2013; Interview 34 with the Party secretary of P village, 20 May 2013.

most of the villagers we interviewed were left with the impression that Miao was presumptuous and unpredictable.

As EcoLiving's standing in the village sank and hopes that the community would be transformed evaporated, village cadres turned to creating bureaucratic obstacles and disrupting EcoLiving's operations. Miao had invited a Chengdu television station to make a documentary about eco-development in P village. But even though the video was shot, it was never aired, owing to opposition by some town officials and interference by village cadres. When he was interviewed, the village committee director said that both he and the village Party secretary agreed it was better not to seek attention from the media, since they believed that bragging was counterproductive, insomuch as an overly rosy depiction of P village's achievements would attract visitors but then leave them disappointed and they would never return.⁴⁹ On another occasion, EcoLiving planned to raise pigs in a cleaner, less polluting way and to rent land from several households to build pigsties. The village committee opposed this initiative and called in the Land and Resources Bureau to investigate the NGO's "inappropriate" (*bu hefa*) land use.⁵⁰

As the years went by, obstruction by local cadres became more forceful and they sometimes combined "moving the masses" with bureaucratic ploys. In early 2013, after EcoLiving organized tourists from Chengdu to visit P village to sample "ecological pork" (*shengtai zhurou*),

⁴⁹ Interview 1 with the director of the P village committee, 17 May 2013.

⁵⁰ Interview 15 with EcoLiving's local program chief in P village, 18 May 2013.

the village committee director mobilized some residents to block the road leading into the village. He told EcoLiving's program head that he was just following orders from above. The local program chief immediately telephoned the village Party secretary and angrily told him that this was impeding the village's development. Although the blockade was lifted, and tourists eventually made it to the pork tasting, Miao was reportedly reduced to tears when she heard about this incident.⁵¹

The most devastating attacks on EcoLiving were leveled by village cadres who reported its missteps, both real and made-up, to the county Bureau of Civil Affairs, the local department responsible for managing NGOs. A July 2012 report by village leaders resulted in EAP failing its annual inspection and meant that EcoLiving could not use EAP to raise money or receive tourists. The village leadership came up with this tactic after they realized that although they and the J town government could not control a Beijing-based NGO, they did have the right to supervise EAP, owing to its local registration.⁵² It is worth noting that while they sought to have the association's charter revoked, village cadres considered EAP a useful instrument for attracting investment and donations, if only they could wrest it away from EcoLiving. A village committee member explained: "We [local cadres] had a thorough discussion about it. We indeed

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Interview 30 with a village cadre, 19 May 2013; Interview 34 with the Party secretary of P village, 20 May 2013; Interview 35 with a "college-graduate village cadre" (*daxuesheng cungan*) in P village, 17 June 2013.

think EAP is a valuable platform. But we can't use it.... It's a real pity to revoke the organization's charter.... We don't want to see this happen, but our people can't get in the EAP.”⁵³

The 2012 annual inspection failure signaled both to villagers and EcoLiving that Harmonious Land had fallen into official disfavor. Villagers learned from grassroots cadres that EcoLiving had not passed and rumors spread rapidly that EAP was an illegal organization and had been banned.⁵⁴ EcoLiving staff blamed the village leadership for misrepresenting the inspection's results⁵⁵ and the local program chief felt that the NGO had been treated unfairly and deserved an explanation from the county Bureau of Civil Affairs. But, fair or not, the local head and other EcoLiving staff realized that the tide had turned and practices that had been allowed during the first three inspections were now being singled out for scrutiny. Despite efforts by EcoLiving to correct problems the Bureau of Civil Affairs had pointed out and be inspected again, the bureau let the original inspection stand and never conducted another review. EcoLiving's "borrowed power" (cf. Kayden 1990; Ziff and Rao 1997) was totally gone. By 2013, most villagers came to believe that "the association had just died" and "all that Miao had

⁵³ Interview 30 with a village cadre, 19 May 2013.

⁵⁴ Interview 16 with the wife of EAP's director, 18 May 2013; Interview 23 with the wife of an EAP warehouse worker, 18 May 2013.

⁵⁵ Interview 36 with an EcoLiving staff member who had been working in P village for several years, 18 June 2013.

done was not in accord with the law.”⁵⁶ That winter EcoLiving departed the village and programs that were scheduled to last until 2023 were suspended.

Consequences: Disillusionment and New Faith in the Village Leadership

EcoLiving’s experience in P village was not a complete failure. It made some progress in shifting villagers’ values and spurring institutional change. Through their participation in EAP, villagers learned more about contemporary environmentalism and became familiar with more inclusive ways to run a village.⁵⁷ Grassroots cadres came to appreciate what social organizations could do, and viewed EAP as a tool to secure financing and contact companies and other organizations outside the village. After EAP was suspended in 2013, local cadres quickly set up a cooperative much like EAP, with village leaders in charge. Even the village Party secretary, despite his many complaints about Harmonious Land and Miao, acknowledged that EcoLiving had done some things well and regarded its approach to development as a potential “model” (*dianxing*) to be emulated.⁵⁸ An EcoLiving staff member was even more positive: “For villagers here, the values we have been promoting have taken root in their hearts. . . Even as we leave, the

⁵⁶ Interview 16 with the wife of EAP’s director, 18 May 2013; Interview 23 with the wife of EAP’s warehouse worker, 18 May 2013.

⁵⁷ Teets (2009, 332) emphasizes how cooperation between NGOs, a community, and local authorities can begin a “learning process” where “all actors learn the strengths and weaknesses of the others.” In a less-affected area, recovery efforts reduced the “strangeness” and “otherness” of NGOs and produced “at least a passing familiarity and trust” (Menefee and Nordtveit 2012, 606).

⁵⁸ Interview 34 with the Party secretary of P village, 20 May 2013.

future development of the village will reflect our influence. I think we have brought changes to the village that are profound, not superficial.”⁵⁹

Still, on balance, EcoLiving’s five years in P village cannot be considered a success.⁶⁰

Before the earthquake, the residents of P village had little knowledge of civil society organizations and no impression of NGOs, good or bad.⁶¹ Trust and respect for EcoLiving grew in the first year and reached a peak when the road to J town was paved, but plummeted when eco-tourism and various other initiatives brought few benefits to villagers. As the years went by, trust continued to fall as EcoLiving seemed to be merely going through the motions on projects such as democratic governance and organic agriculture,⁶² where villagers constantly mocked the NGO for wasting money and hiring one outside expert after another who knew little about farming in their challenging environment.⁶³

EcoLiving, despite considerable effort, also never succeeded in persuading villagers that it did not have selfish motives. Gossip constantly had it that EcoLiving cared primarily about profits for itself, and that government grants and rental and compensation agreements that

⁵⁹ Interview 28 with an EcoLiving staff member working in P village, 19 May 2013. NGO staff in the disaster recovery project examined by Liu, Wang and Dang (2018, 57, 58) also rated their own performance highly and believed that their impact would be more long-lasting than most community members did.

⁶⁰ In most of the literature on Chinese NGOs, “success” is a stand-in for survival. EcoLiving did live to fight another day. But it did not bring most of the social changes it sought to P village.

⁶¹ Interview 29 with the EAP director, 19 May 2013.

⁶² Interview 1 with the P village committee director 17 May 2013.

⁶³ Interview 2 and 3 with villagers from P village, 17 May 2013.

produced a little money for residents generated windfalls for EcoLiving.”⁶⁴ In the end, most villagers simply did not believe that Miao had come to P village out of public-spiritedness or a desire to promote rural development. As one put it: “Making money was Miao’s goal, otherwise why did she bother coming here?”⁶⁵ The wife of the EAP’s head agreed: “If she didn’t reap some benefits, why did she come up here? Isn’t it more comfortable for her to sit at home and drink tea?”⁶⁶

By the time EcoLiving left in 2013, most villagers were deeply disillusioned, distrustful and felt they had been used by Miao.⁶⁷ Some of the most capable EAP leaders doubted their own abilities and felt even more powerless than they had been before the NGO arrived.⁶⁸ Almost all villagers were happy to see EcoLiving leave and were unconvinced that eco-development was a viable way forward or that NGOs should play a leading role in the village’s future.

As a result of their disenchantment with EcoLiving, and perhaps because the local leadership had upped their game and became more conscientious to compete with EcoLiving, villagers by

⁶⁴ Interviews 2-4 with villagers from P village, 17 May 2013. Local people tended to exaggerate the amount of money a project generated.

⁶⁵ Interview 5 with villagers from P village, 18 May 2013. In another post-earthquake recovery effort in Sichuan, villagers suspected, without any evidence, that an NGO was embezzling private donations and financial support from the government (Liu and Wang 2019, 9).

⁶⁶ Interview 16 with the wife of EAP’s director, 18 May 2013.

⁶⁷ Interview 9 with a P village team leader, 18 May 2013.

⁶⁸ Interview 29 with the director of EAP, 19 May 2013; Interview 14 with the vice director of EAP, 18 May 2013; Interview 30 with a village cadre, 19 May 2013.

2013 tended to believe that the village leadership⁶⁹ was a better partner than a civil society organization. While EcoLiving was still in the village, grassroots cadres started a popular program to provide villagers with free bamboo seedlings.⁷⁰ They also boosted the oversight role of the “village assembly” (*yishihui*) and increased transparency surrounding public expenditures.⁷¹ In 2013, as the NGO prepared to leave P village, one production team leader contrasted EcoLiving’s meetings with those convened by the village leadership and judged the NGO’s to be too long, too late at night, and a form of “brainwashing.”⁷² Most villagers who were interviewed that year felt that EcoLiving should make way for village cadres to take the lead again. One villager put it simply: “We all want to cooperate with the government! EcoLiving should give up!”⁷³ In short, as trust in the NGO declined, trust in grassroots cadres increased.⁷⁴ An effort to rely on the non-state sector to promote development ended up

⁶⁹ Heurlin’s (2016, 91) surveys show that trust in NGOs and local government tend to move in tandem, both up and down. Ours is a different story.

⁷⁰ Interview 7 with villagers from P village, 18 May 2013; Interview 34 with the Party secretary of P village, 20 May 2013.

⁷¹ Interview 31 with EAP’s purchasing agent, 19 May 2013.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Interview 9 with a P village team leader, 18 May 2013.

⁷⁴ Surveys and interviews show that the public often prefers to approach the Chinese state for help rather than NGOs (Heurlin 2016; Teets 2009, 331). That local cadres tirelessly worked to promote reconstruction often occurred, and was a major theme of Party propaganda in the aftermath of the earthquake (Sorace 2017, chap. 2) and could also be a source of this shift in trust. In P village, however, trust of the government was low during the first years of reconstruction.

enhancing the legitimacy of the local leadership, even though, remarkably enough, the previous two Party secretaries of P village had been prosecuted for embezzling disaster relief funds.

An Irony and a Theoretical Payoff

Why did EcoLiving lose the trust of P village's cadres and villagers, each for different reasons? At first glance, the explanation might seem to center on a lack of "downward accountability" (Edwards and Hulme 1996; Ebrahim 2003; Kilby 2006; Andrews 2014).⁷⁵ EcoLiving did not listen to the community closely, partner with grassroots leaders and villagers effectively, or engage in "downward dialogues" (Unerman and O'Dwyer 2010, 481) often enough. This is all true: EcoLiving talked about inclusiveness and empowerment, but did not consistently promote civic participation when designing and implementing its programs. Like many other NGOs (Unerman and O'Dwyer 2010, 480; Kilby 2005, 954), EcoLiving believed in the correctness of its actions and failed to consult stakeholders regularly, because it "knew" it was doing the right thing.

But the problems went much deeper than weak downward accountability. Better communication and "accountability dialogues" (O'Dwyer and Unerman 2010), had they been taken to heart, would have shown that, once the villagers' homes were rebuilt and the road was

⁷⁵ Andrews (2014, 99) defines "downward accountability" as beneficiaries having say over NGO practices and the latter must justify their actions.

paved, the community simply did not want what EcoLiving had on offer. EcoLiving and the residents of P village possessed a shared interest in development, sustainability and the local environment, but did not agree about how to pursue it. EcoLiving's mission as an environmental NGO, like feminist NGOs in Mexico that were frustrated when the Zapatistas favored economic development over women's empowerment (Andrews 2014), contradicted the view of development and the "environmentalism of the poor" that appealed to many community members. EcoLiving, as a value-driven organization with a clear *Weltanschauung*, found it difficult to embrace beneficiary perspectives about affordability, sustainability and inclusiveness without abandoning its vision and reason for being.⁷⁶ Community trust seeped away because of mismatches in goals and aspirations, and can be traced to EcoLiving's organizational identity, more than to its arrogance or incompetence.

As with NGOs in other parts of the quake zone (Liu, Wang and Dang 2018, 56, 58), EcoLiving was not prepared to navigate the micropolitics of P village and lacked local knowledge, but more importantly the gulf that opened up arose from divergent values and EcoLiving's "inward accountability" (Andrews 2014, 99) to its mission, understanding of environmentalism, and development strategy. Once the "consensus crisis" (Xu, 2017, chap. 1)

⁷⁶ *Weltanschauung*-based values can conflict with beneficiaries' "temporal" interests and interfere with downward accountability (Kirby 2006, 953, 954). Giving in to constituents when a values disagreement exists can also delegitimize the work of an NGO elsewhere (Andrews 2014, 106).

that the earthquake produced faded, differences in concerns reappeared, a clash between a NGO's world view and villagers and grassroots cadres' interests and needs emerged, and an always-shaky agreement about goals and priorities disappeared (Xu 2017, 112). EcoLiving's top-down instincts were problematic, but a more bottom-up and responsive approach to villagers it sought to help and cadres it had to work with would only have exposed conflicting values and expectations more swiftly. By the end, villagers and grassroots cadres alike were deeply suspicious of the NGO's "transforming vision" (Scott 1998), and regarded it to be naïve and impractical on the one hand, and threatening on the other. This was a large part of the reason why community members escalated from conventional everyday forms of resistance (which often work to a degree) to more direct confrontation, and felt it was urgent to push the NGO out of the village.⁷⁷

An Epilogue and Concluding Remarks

The story of P village of course did not end in 2013. After EcoLiving withdrew, village cadres resumed their place at the center of community political life. At first, they showed considerable initiative, by, for example, inviting professors from Sichuan Tourism University to help them devise a development strategy. And in the first few years, villagers supported their

⁷⁷ Thanks to Oane Visser (personal communication, 27 May 2019) for this insight.

efforts, joining an economic cooperative they set up and contributing land for tourism ventures, including planting flowers, turning fields into lawns, and building fish ponds. But most of these projects were poorly-planned and remained uncompleted, or if finished, deteriorated quickly owing to lack of funds for maintenance. When we visited P village in summer 2019, we found ponds empty of water let alone fish, and lawns that had been taken over by weeds. Worse still, the village leadership had taken down a building constructed by EcoLiving that had been slated to become a high-end hotel, but now needed a hard-to-get land use permit if it was to be rebuilt.⁷⁸ Almost all the villagers we interviewed in 2019 blamed village cadres for having “made a huge mess” (*lanfanfan*), and more than a dozen families that had enlarged their homes to accommodate “rural tourism” (*nongjiale*) were the angriest of all, because agritourism had not taken off. The economic cooperative was also struggling and it was not clear whether villagers would ever get the principal they invested back. After six years with village cadres in charge, many people who had criticized EcoLiving now praised it. They often used the term “at least” (*zhishao*) to describe EcoLiving’s achievements: *at least* it paid rental fees in a timely fashion; *at least* it constructed a number of buildings and public spaces; *at least* it could bring visitors from all over the world to the village; *at least* villagers received dividends twice, however small.

⁷⁸ EcoLiving was able to build without a land quota in the immediate wake of the earthquake. Years later, after tearing the building down, it was much harder to get permission to convert arable land.

Some now believed they had been too quick to drive EcoLiving out and said they would welcome EcoLiving and Miao back to lead them once again.

EcoLiving's unhappy experience in P village stands as a cautionary tale about power relationships and community micropolitics. Chinese NGOs endorsed by higher-level authorities can enter villages fairly easily, and trust from above can help them gain trust from below. For value-driven ENGOs that aspire to transform rural society with ambitious, long-term programs, however, there is a real possibility that they will become entangled in power competition with village cadres and disputes with villagers who have their own understanding of development, sustainability and environmentalism. Value clashes and power struggles can cause trust to decline and even trigger resistance, especially after the attention of an NGO's supporters at higher levels turns elsewhere. During the first stage of Harmonious Land, EcoLiving could act boldly and win the acquiescence of village cadres, because it borrowed power from higher levels. But EcoLiving always had limited organizational capacity, and its borrowed power was fleeting and no match for opposition that arose on two fronts.

The power that villagers and grassroots leaders had was not the ability to bend an NGO to their purposes, but the power to frustrate and block: a type of agency that sprang from a reluctance to cooperate. Even when faced with an NGO that had achieved much elsewhere and was welcomed by county and provincial leaders, villagers and local elites could, through actions both hidden and open, say "this is not for us." One of the truths of NGO studies is that

“beneficiaries rarely question NGOs” (Andrews 2014, 101), but P villagers and cadres did. At a time of weakness following a devastating earthquake, they still had the willingness and wherewithal to obstruct and they, separately and jointly, devised effective tactics to thwart and ultimately expel EcoLiving.

But in the end their victory was a hollow one for the community. As our most recent fieldwork shows, grassroots cadres have performed no better than EcoLiving since re-taking the helm in P village. A temporary alliance of convenience that pushed EcoLiving out has collapsed and local leaders are once again the main focus of popular frustration with weak economic growth. Old divisions between the powerful and the powerless have reappeared and lack of trust in outsiders has been replaced with a lack of trust in insiders.

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