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Beyond Place Attachment: Land Attachment of Resettled Farmers in Jiangsu, China

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Abstract: This paper examines the concept of land attachment—a positive emotional relationship between a resettled farmer and his or her rural land—in the context of China’s rapid urbanization and the resultant huge number of resettled and landless farmers. It explores the nature of resettled farmers’ emotional relationships to rural land to reveal the kinds of land that are meaningful to farmers’ lives, and the differences among different groups. The study’s conceptual framework was based on place attachment theory. Grounded theory was applied to analyze qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews. The results show that land attachment can be divided into seven categories: landscape, lifestyle, land income, land rights, land rootedness, land culture, and villagers’ relationships. We also observed three categories of emotional relationships between resettled farmers and rural land: “reluctant to give up rural land and with land attachment”, “willing to give up rural land but with land attachment”, and “willing to give up rural land and without land attachment”. This study’s exploration of the concept of land attachment revealed that rural land is not merely an objective asset but that it also has a multidimensional existence, and may be the focus of subjective loss. The study also observed that it would be helpful to deepen understandings of the subjective loss experienced by resettled farmers as a result of land-requisition policies. Drawing from its findings, the paper concludes with suggestions supportive of the sustainable development of future policies and communities.

Keywords: place attachment; land attachment; resettled farmer; China

1. Introduction: Farmer–Land Relationship and Land Attachment

China has experienced phenomenal landed urbanization since 1978 [1]. It is documented that the average annual transfer of rural cultivated land to urban land use has increased from about 133,000 hectares per year during 1990–2000 to more than 200,000 hectares per year during 2000–2010 [2]. As a result, many farmers have been forced to leave their land and confront a changed identity in the process. Although there is no accurate count of landless farmers, Lu (2015) estimated that between 2005 and 2015, the average annual increase of land-lost farmers in China was about 2.6 million [3].

Changing from a rural to an urban lifestyle is a complex process [4], often associated with emotions such as loss, sorrow, worry, estrangement, and nostalgia [5]. Rapid urbanization has not only brought objective problems to city spaces [6,7], but also subjective losses, including the demise of certain customs and values which may only rarely be observed in city life [8–11]. People having

positive experiences could lead to positive environmental behaviors [12]. While policymakers and researchers have given great attention to China's landless farmers in terms of employment and livelihood restoration [13–15], they have left land expropriation and its emotional impacts relatively under-examined [16].

In attending to this lacuna, this paper aims to unpack the emotional aspects of “land” within the Chinese context. It is argued that the term “land” not only represents a space that supports life, work, recreation, and social communication, but is also a place full of meaningful symbolism [17–20]. For example, Carvalho-Ribeiro [19] explored the notion of land as an important component of subjective landscape image. Lokhorst et al. [21] also observed that the more farmer felt connected to their land, the more likely they would be to preserve it. Such connectedness to nature has also been described in other works [22,23]. Undoubtedly, modern farmers retain deep and steady affection towards their farmland, even if they may be unable to keep it forever [24–28]. To counterbalance the existing dominant research focus on the productive and economic aspects of rural land [29–31], there is a need to attend to the cultural and emotional meaning of rural land to the farmers in China.

Place attachment refers to the bonding people share with places [32,33], and has been widely discussed in the fields of human geography and environmental psychology [34–36] to examine various people–place relationships. This includes work on concepts such as of sense of place, place identity, rootedness, and place satisfaction [37–39]. Following the similar mode of examination, this paper attempts to explore farmers' attachment to land amidst rapid urbanization in China. It aims to answer two key questions: (1) what kinds of emotional relationship do resettled farmers have toward their rural land? (2) What is the character of land attachment, if it exists? The paper is organized as follows. First, we introduce a southern China case study and establish a research framework to explore the existence and meaning of land attachment. Second, the dimensions of land attachment and its emotional links are discussed. Third, drawing upon our findings, theoretical and policy implications are presented in the paper's concluding paragraphs.

2. Exploring Land Attachment: Methods and Study Area

2.1. Study Area

The city of Wuxi was selected as the case study for this work. As a city in Jiangsu—a coastal province north of Shanghai—Wuxi has a long history of local government land acquisition for urban development (Figure 1). As one of China's wealthiest cities in terms of GDP, there has been significant demand for arable land to support new construction. Jiangsu province experienced rapid urbanization over the period 2000 to 2015: its urban growth rates (41.49% in 2000, 53.20% in 2007, and 66.52% in 2015) have consistently been in the top six among China's 31 provinces.

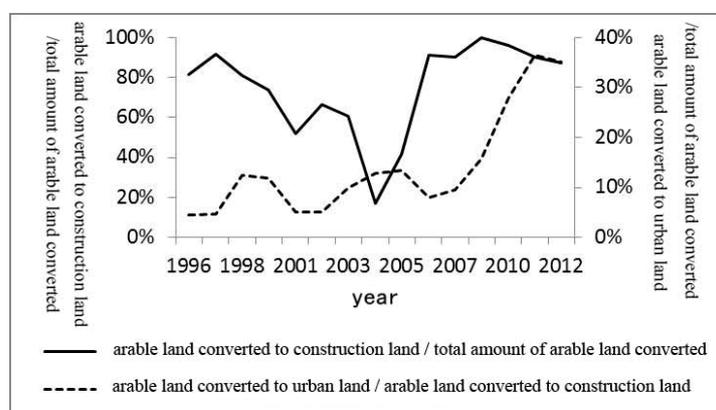


Figure 1. Arable land converted into urban land in Wuxi, 1996–2012 (Source: Land Resources Department of Wuxi City).

In practice, the compensation package given to resettled farmers in Wuxi City varies from region to region. For example, in our preliminary research on this project, we found that compensation for land appropriated for public use, such as for building hospitals, schools, and roads, was less than 10,000 yuan per household, but with no accurate count. Additionally, the compensation standard increased over time, and resettled farmers now receive nearly 15 times more money than they were entitled to ten years ago, excluding governmental social security. This implies that we should differentiate different types of communities upon which to base the pre-existing farmer–land emotional relationship; we thus selected five communities in each region (Table 1 and Figure 2).

Table 1. Selected communities.

N	District	Construction Year	Households Affected	Reason for Resettlement
A	Huishan	2002	About 1900	Agricultural business
B	Beitang	2007	About 4000	Building factories and developing real estate
C	Nanchang	2005	About 500	Building a public hospital
D	Binhu	2002	About 1300	Building factories and developing real estate
E	Xishan	2011	About 8000	Building East New City in Wuxi

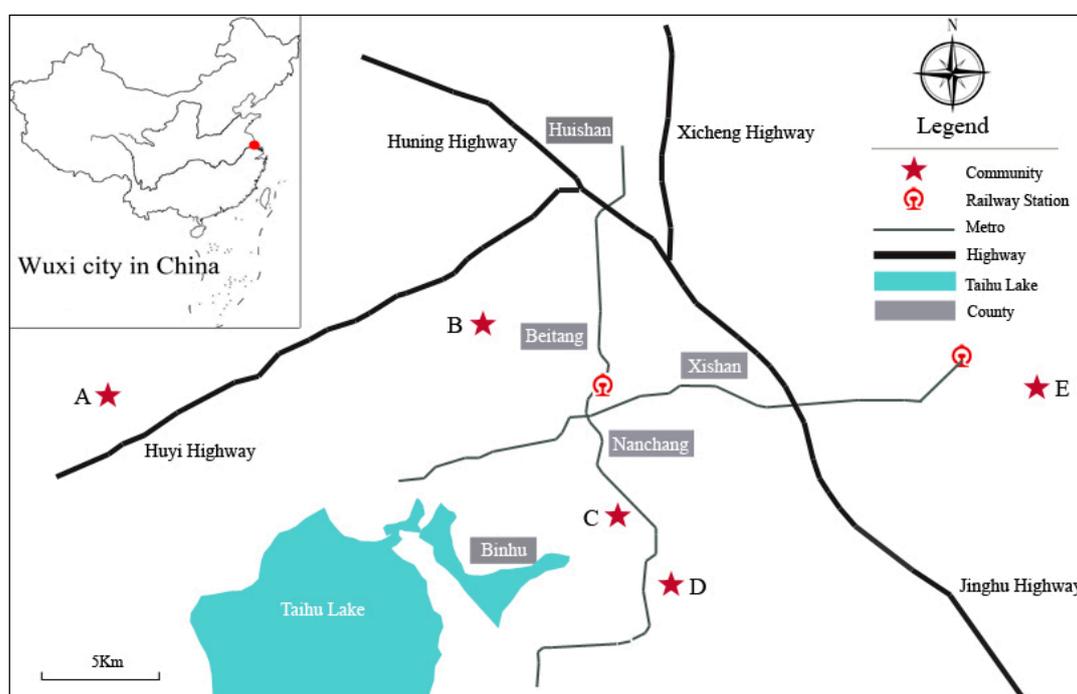


Figure 2. Outline map showing the location of the case communities.

2.2. In-Depth Interviews

To collect the memories and emotional descriptions of their rural land, we had in-depth interviews with some resettled farmers after their land had been expropriated for a time. As we aimed at exploring the meaning of land to single person, the study focused on individuals rather than families. However, as most of the resettled farmers, especially the younger, worked in the city and lived near their workplace, it was hard to find them during working days in the resettled communities. To make samples representative, we conducted three in-depth interviews at weekend, separately in July and December 2015, and in April 2016.

Given the complexity of this process, the duration of the interaction with participants was key. In our study, the average duration of each interaction was 50 minutes. We raised the following open questions: “(1) How long it is since you left the rural community? What was your former rural

location? (2) What do you think of your current life in your resettlement community? (3) What is your memory of the rural land? (4) Do you agree that rural land is an important part of your life?" Demographic information such as age, job, income, and family composition were also included during the interaction.

In total, 22 males and 20 females participated in the survey, including farmers aged below 23 years (4 males and 3 females), aged between 24 and 45 years (5 males and 6 females), aged between 46 and 60 years (7 males and 6 females), aged over 60 years (6 males and 5 females).

2.3. Data Categorization and Analysis

Interviewees often differed in their opinions, and it was necessary to establish an appropriate way to organize the diverse qualitative data. Grounded theory is well-suited to addressing murky social problems that demand flexible research questions and where extant theory is insufficient to support sound hypothesis development [40]. Accordingly, we applied grounded theory to our analysis of the qualitative data. A multi-step analysis technique based on the approach of Liu and Kang [41] and Charmaz [42] was employed. NVivo 10 was used to process the qualitative data as follows (Table 2): initial coding was established as a word-for-word approach to select key terms in the text regarding subjective understandings of land attachment. Focused coding was directed toward identifying repeated words and main phrases among initial codes and concentrating the description into categories of land attachment. Axial coding was applied to locate the linkage among subcategories by re-reading text in context, finally exploring land-related emotions.

Table 2. Coding procedures in this study.

Steps	① Initial Coding	② Focused Coding	③ Memo-Writing	④ Axial Coding
Objective	Coding key words/phrase in text	Forming subcategories and categories of land attachment	Forming logical link among categories/subcategories	Forming different types of land attachment
Operation in NVivo	Making free nodes	Creating tree nodes	Making a document memo	Creating node links in document

3. Unpacking Land Attachment

Drawing upon the above research methods, seven dimensions of the concept of land attachment were found (Table 3).

First, dwelling environment refers to the rural living conditions that support farmers, and includes rural housing and the natural environment. With the contrast of the inconvenient city life, rural landscape provided spacious houses and nature-friendly environment.

Lifestyle refers to the security and freedom that rural land offers a farmer. Rural land can be used not only to produce good food for the farmer but also to provide a safe space to raise children and to more conveniently care for the aged. Rural land also offers peace in one's personal life.

Land economics refers to the expenses and income associated with rural land. In China's rural land distribution system, every rural family is allotted a certain amount of farmland. Beyond providing everyday food for farmers and their families, the production of poultry, livestock, fruit, and vegetables can also be used to generate extra income.

Land rights are supported by rules that allow farmers to make decisions regarding their land. Farmers have actual disposal rights regarding planting, exchanging, or bequeathing of their property, despite a 1982 law transferring ownership of the land to village collectives instead of individuals. In other words, each farmer owns the rights to use their rural land, forming a clear identification with "my" land.

Land rootedness is an emotion experienced by resettled farmers with regard to their rural land. It includes memories, and senses of loss and longing, which have garnered much attention in the field

of place attachment [39,43,44]. Although it may seem abstract, land rootedness establishes a strong and enduring connection with rural land.

Land culture refers to traditional customs, festivals, and celebrations related to rural land. The culture derives from a stable local history and associated sense of belonging [45–47]. Land culture exists in the long-term relationship between farmer and land, nature, and belief, which reflects affection and awe in worship and celebration.

Villagers' relationships refer to resettled farmers' social relationships as constructed in the former rural social structure.

Based on our analysis, we find that the land is a comprehensive object that embraces economics, social relationships, and cultural psychology, rather than serving merely as an asset. In this paper, therefore, land attachment refers to a positive subjective connection between resettled farmers and their rural land.

Table 3. Dimensions of land attachment.

Dimension	Category	Subcategory	Key Phrases ¹
Dwelling Environment	House	More spacious Better house	More spacious rural house Bigger rooms in rural house More strongly built rural house Preferred decor of rural house More comfortable living in rural house
	Environment	Close to nature No interference Fewer conflicts	There was quiet life on rural land; good natural environment We lived in villas with no interference from each other We had no conflicts with neighbors, but we do now
Lifestyle	Food security	Healthier food	Did not worry about food safety on my rural land; the cabbages did not have to be sprayed with insecticide; the chickens and ducks tasted better in the countryside
	Living security	Traffic security Life security Psychological security	There was wide playing space in former times; we did not need to worry about our children's security We seldom heard that something had been stolen Rural people were peaceful, but now we often come across people with defensive mindsets; rural land supports a peaceful life
	Convenience	Convenient for the aged	Senior citizens could better enjoy life on rural land, because they did not have to go up and down stairs as in current life
		Convenient for life	It was convenient for me to air my quilt; it was convenient for me to park my car on rural land
	Like farming	Not accustomed to life without rural land	I felt happy when I was planting; I am not accustomed to a life without rural land; undoubtedly, farming made me feel good
	Farming is a leisurely lifestyle	Wish to obtain Hobby	I wish to have some land in the country; I would like to plant something; when I was farming, I could live a full life; planting a peach tree could create a hobby for my parents when they are old I could plant flowers as I like; I could plant my beloved flowers
	Farming was good for health	Farming was good for health	Farming was good for health; farming was a good way to get exercise.
Land Economics	Freedom	Free lifestyle	I could do as I wished with my goods The lifestyle on rural land made me feel free I loved the lifestyle on rural land
	Low living cost	Low cost of living	We could support ourselves on rural land We did not need to buy food
Land Rights	Profitable crops	Profitable crops	We had better income by planting cabbages We had better income by planting peach trees
	Land rights	No right to choose No participation Can be inherited	We had no choice but to leave our land Our farmer could not participate in policymaking Unlike a city house, a rural house can be inherited by the next generation

Table 3. Cont.

Dimension	Category	Subcategory	Key Phrases ¹
Land Rootedness	Land rootedness	Memories of ancestors Memories of the living land Memories of the production land Feeling of loss Feeling of familiarity Feeling of pride	I could remember my grandfather and grandmother; rural land was a place where my ancestors lived; the rural land made me miss my ancestors I could remember the games we played in fields and the shining stars on summer nights; it was a tough experience to build a house in those days; my love for the rural land may be a memory. I was good at farm work; I miss the bustling scene of farm work in those days. I feel that the rural land belongs to me; I was reluctant to give up my rural land; I have a feeling of loss; I miss the rural land because it was my birthplace; I took some photos when we left; we cannot live without land; land is the lifeblood of a farmer; I wish my descendants could understand about rural land Only hard-working people like farming; Yangshan's juicy peaches were the most authentic variety; I was proud to harvest food from the land
Land Culture	Land culture	Land worship Land celebration	Some places still maintain the temple of the local god of the land; I participated in the temple fair when I was a child; I can remember the sacrificial ceremony to the local god of the land There was a peach flower festival when spring came
Villager Relationships	Get along with villager Help each other	Chat together Felt relaxed No quarrels Help each other	We played together in the country; we chatted with each other and even had meals together; we had many neighbors before, and we chatted after work We did not need to take off our shoes when we visited friends. We did not argue with each other, I felt more relaxed on rural land. I can easily get help from my villagers; even we feel it was common practice to help each other.

¹ Because there were many descriptions of the initial codes, we selected some typical expressions for the "key phrases" column of the table.

4. Different Types of Land Attachment

As a concept originating from place attachment, land attachment describes a positive subjective perception in a general sense. By creating node links in document, the study formed three types of land attachment.

4.1. Reluctant to Give Up Rural Land and with Land Attachment

The farmers interviewed were apt to discuss land attachment when comparing their former rural life and current city life. When asked why they were reluctant to give up their rural land, they often noted initially the disadvantages of their current life, and then described the advantages of their rural life. The in-depth interviews showed that there were three main dimensions to resettled farmers' reluctance to give up their rural land. First, and perhaps not surprisingly, the longer they had inhabited their rural land, the stronger was their land attachment. This same conclusion has been reached in other research studies on place attachment [48–50]. Second, resettled farmers' lower income levels in urban areas made them yearn for the lower costs of living associated with rural life. Most lack the skills to enable them to earn a steady living in the city and found themselves facing much higher living expenses than before [51,52]. For example, some people stated that it cost them up to an extra 1000 yuan per month for expenditure on rice, vegetables, fuel, and transportation. Third, the comfortable life supported by rural land, especially contrast with the disadvantage of urban life, could strengthen the feeling of land attachment. This same conclusion is also reflected in environmental psychological research, in which the active emotional relationship between people and nature landscape is expressed [53–55]. Fourth, to encourage farmers to move to new communities, the government offers a relocation agreement. This provides relocated farmers priority in selecting houses. House allocations are determined by drawing lots, a process that totally reconstructed original

neighborhood relationships. The method afforded government an efficient way to obtain land, but it destroyed the original rural neighborhoods. For example, resettled farmers were unable to find time to visit old friends, and many interviewees said, “Although I live in new house now, I feel estranged from other people”. By contrast with their new urban homes, interviewees endowed rural space with much more meaning through daily interactions [56,57].

4.2. Willing to Give Up Rural Land but with Land Attachment

Some farmers expressed a conflicted emotion toward rural land. On the one hand, they sought to give up rural land and become city dwellers, while, on the other hand, they had an emotional attachment to the land. Interviewee Mr. X is a 27-year-old company staff member who graduated from university two years prior. He said, “You know, it was not easy for us to extricate ourselves from rural land, everybody dreamed to live near nature. But people would laugh at me if I should earn my life on rural land”. Perhaps it seems a little contradictory that willingness to give up rural land and land attachment coexist in one person, but it truly reflects a despised status of farmers living on rural land, during a long history period. Even nowadays in China, the urban–rural gap still promotes an unbalanced distribution of investments. Farming has been seen as a livelihood of limited personal development.

There are also strong push-and-pull forces underpinning attachments to rural land in China. Negative aspects of city life such as pollution, food insecurity, daily life pressures, and traffic accidents cause people to consider returning the country. And at a more abstract level, many famous Chinese poems and essays promote an attachment to rural life. Of course, fond memories also serve as a powerful lure. Interviewee Miss Y, a 23-year-old university student, said, “I have little experience on farming work. The only thing I knew was . . . my grandparents reaping plants in the field. I am sure I love rural land . . . But I need the metro, school, hospital in city”.

4.3. Willing to Give Up Rural Land and Without Land Attachment

For the third group, the stance for being willing to give up land can be attributed to three factors. First, without modern machines, and confronted by agricultural taxes, farmers spend hard years on the land. Indeed, the challenging and troublesome character of farming work struck interviewees the most. Agricultural pursuits make demands on farmers’ personal experience and knowledge levels, and involve burdensome physical activities such as weeding, fertilizing, and irrigating during the growth cycle. Farmers additionally must judge timing related to crop planting and harvest according to weather, market, and policy. Generally, and in comparison to working in a factory for example, farming is more time-consuming. In this sense, the prospect of a physically easier life in the resettlement area contributed to these respondents’ emotional willingness to give up their rural land.

The second reason participants cited as an incentive to surrender their land is the comparatively meager income that can be earned from farming work. In the context of the small-scale farming in the case study area (0.02 hectare cultivated area per person), farmers could earn no more than 2000–5000 yuan per year by selling grain, and might derive a small income from selling vegetables, eggs and other farm products. Moreover, farmers must spend a great deal of money on items such as fertilizer, pesticide, machinery, and irrigation. By contrast, farmers finding employment in the city can achieve incomes nearly 10 times those they could realize on rural land. On the other hand, farmers saw farming work as offering a guarantee of a lower cost of living, rather than as a major source of income for their families. Generally, this lower cost of living is one of the reasons for farmers’ emotional connection to rural land.

Third, resettled policy brought subsidies to senior citizens, so they no longer need to earn a living on the land anymore. To make up for the loss of land, Senior citizens could get RMB 700–900 per month from the government, allowing most to save RMB 400–500 per month. For those without strong land attachment, this reinforced their willingness to give up rural land.

5. Discussion

5.1. Land Attachment and Place Attachment

At first glance, land attachment in this study could be easily regarded as a different concept of place attachment. It seems necessary to discuss the relations between the two concepts.

On the one hand, place attachment supports a theory foundation to land attachment. Place attachment attends to the relationship between people and place; similarly, land attachment focuses on the emotional relationship between resettled farmers and their rural land. Place attachment has been researched quite broadly. Scannell and Gifford synthesized place attachment into a three-dimensional, person–process–place organizing framework [32]. To some extent, land attachment picks up the “place” element of place attachment.

On the other hand, as an all-encompassing concept, place attachment might obscure the meaning of rural land to resettled farmers in this study. Usually, the countryside in China is presented as a timeless, unchanging place [58]. Traditional farmers have an intimate understanding of the land [26]. Likewise, and whether or not they make their living from the land, rural landholding “lifestylers” or amenity residents, form a strong attachment with their land [59]. In China, rural land endows a unique culture link to farmer, and land attachment might be read as an idyllic kind of attachment to a past rural land. However, the fast urbanization process breaks the link by land acquisition and resettlement policies, therefore a reconstructed “narrow” concept instead of a wide meaning was more suitable for this research. Generally, this study focused on a specific and explicit object “rural land” could be a helpful to reveal the overlooked emotion of resettled farmers brought by policy.

Hence, we think it is a little arbitrary to make a clear distinction between land attachment and place attachment, but land attachment does have its abundant meaning in the context of Chinese social change.

5.2. Policy Implication for Sustainable Policy/Community Development

Although it was evident that most resettled farmers love their rural land, there formed three types of land attachment as the change of social reality. For policy makers, this implies that perhaps land attachment is an intrinsic and especially multidimensional affection, and it is easily suffering an eclipse when faced with sharp social change. Some helpful insights could be drawn as follows.

Firstly, local government should improve the infrastructure around resettled communities. High-quality infrastructure, such as school, hospital, and public transport would support more chances for resettled farmers to integrate into the city. Besides, local government and urban managers should make many efforts to create jobs, which could help resettled farmers achieve sustainable livelihoods.

Secondly, it would be helpful if community managers pay attention to the emotional relationship of resettled farmers. For a long time, local government’s attention has been directed to the welfare gains and losses of resettled farmers, and economic tools have often been used to resolve conflicts in this process, such as housing and monetary compensation, but little attention has been given to the emotional and psychological problems of resettled farmers. While homesickness has become a common topic in the midst of rapid urbanization [60,61], we still know little about the emotional effects of resettlement on farmers many years after having been removed from their land, and whether their emotional connection would affect decisions made to their future dwelling plans. Thus, it is a necessary but challenging work for community managers to reconstruct social relationship in resettled community.

5.3. Limitation

Our research has some limitations. First, it is difficult to perform a strict sample investigation in communities. Due to the development of resettlement communities, migrant workers flew in and the younger generation flew out, which caused a complex demographical structure in communities; therefore, it is hard to apply a strict stratified sampling method in fieldwork. Second, by comparison

with Wuxi where local government and village groups dominate resettlement policy, farmers in many areas in China, especially in central and western areas, left their land on their own initiative. The contradiction between personal development and land attachment may therefore be rooted in totally different social/economic contexts. Accordingly, the dimensions of land attachment should be tested according to more empirical research.

6. Conclusions

This study's exploration of the topic concept of land attachment reveals that rural land is not only an objective asset but it also has a multidimensional existence, and may be the focus of subjective loss. Drawing from in-depth interviews, this study explored seven dimensions of land attachment: landscape, lifestyle, land income, land rights, land rootedness, land culture, and villagers' relationships. Generally, land attachment emerged as a positive subjective connection between resettled farmers and their rural land. Resettled farmers might miss their rural land for many years.

The study also observed that there were three types of land attachment among resettled farmers. According to the strength, land attachment could be separately named as: "reluctant to give up rural land and with land attachment", "willing to give up rural land but with land attachment", and "willing to give up rural land and without land attachment".

Drawing from these findings, this paper includes suggestions supportive of the sustainable development of future policies and communities. It would be helpful to deepen understandings of the subjective loss experienced by resettled farmers as a result of land-requisition policies.

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