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# When infrastructures attack:

## The workings of disrepair in China

### ABSTRACT

Residents fighting eviction in China often come into intimate knowledge of the insidious workings of infrastructure. This is especially true as redevelopment disputes are increasingly mediated through Chinese reforms emphasizing “rule by law.” Such reforms have worked to attune citizens, as well as city developers, to more distributed forms of agency in what could be termed the “infrastructuralization” of state power. I suggest that it is through the ambiguous signs of infrastructural disrepair that disputes over redevelopment increasingly play themselves out in contemporary China. By tracking the mundane and material effects of disrepair in citizen-state struggles, I ultimately show how infrastructures operate not only in support of state projects of legibility but also to condition some surprising political sensibilities. [*infrastructure, urban development, China, law, sensibility, materiality, state violence*]

**T**he roots of the new banyan trees will not take hold, the old residents predicted. Like the last batch of saplings the city had planted just a few months earlier, these young spindly trees were destined to shrivel pitifully in the sun until the men in the hard hats swept in once more to remove their desiccated remains. Spaced evenly along the neighborhood’s main commercial lane, Nanhou Street, the new trees had appeared all at once one muggy summer afternoon in 2010, each sitting in its own landscaped plot of dark earth and surrounded by the cool spray of temporarily installed city sprinklers. While they were too small to cast useful shade and too fragile to stand upright without the support of bamboo poles propped against their narrow trunks, these trees had come to Sanfang Qixiang (Three Lanes Seven Alleys; hereafter, Lanes and Alleys), Fuzhou’s most famous old neighborhood, to fulfill the promise of the city’s new model of a kinder, gentler form of urban development. Following the recent reopening of Nanhou Street as the official historical heart and key tourist destination of Fuzhou, the new trees had arrived as the latest triumphant sign of the city’s plan, since 2007, for the “greening” and “historic preservation” of the neighborhood.

Yet, while I strolled through the neighborhood on the day the trees were installed, residents warned me repeatedly not to trust the sight of the newly greened lane. “Just you wait and see,” Mrs. Pei told me, “they’ll all be dead in a few months like the last bunch.” Raising her voice just as two uniformed men patrolling the neighborhood walked by us on Nanhou Street, she pointed dramatically from the green branches of one sapling down to the ground beneath its trunk and proclaimed, “There’s something rotten down there.” This new city transplant will never settle in and thrive here, she predicted, because beneath the immaculate surface of landscaped earth and cobblestone that made up the street, there was a hidden maze of corroding pipes and shoddy wires in which the tree’s roots were already being entangled and against which this tree did not stand a chance.

Like most of the remaining residents in Lanes and Alleys, Mrs. Pei had come into intimate knowledge of the insidious workings of infrastructure—that usually black-boxed world of technical substrates and embedded operating platforms “down there”—as various construction

crews had swooped into the neighborhood over the past two years and repeatedly knocked out power supplies, burst water lines, and sent sewage seeping into homes, all in the name of urban “revitalization.” While such infrastructural problems may have looked like the unfortunate side effects of urban construction in progress, Mrs. Pei and her neighbors all seemed convinced that the intruding dangers from “down there” were part and parcel of the development plan authorized from “above” to drive them out of their homes. More insidious than the usual wrecking crews and city police sent to evict recalcitrant residents from neighborhoods slated for redevelopment, the slow crumble and sudden disconnections of infrastructure had come to embody the spectral forces of state plans for eviction and demolition (*chaiqian*), its disrepair becoming the passive-aggressive zone of encounter between state actors, land developers, and citizens holding their ground against forced removal in contemporary China.

Over the past two decades, the razing and rebuilding of whole neighborhoods has become a common, if controversial, sign of China’s spectacular and seemingly unstoppable economic growth. On the one hand, images of towering construction cranes and gleaming new buildings point to the ongoing boom in real estate and land development. On the other hand, pictures of last-standing houses and protests over eviction highlight the messy fallout from such rapid development. Sparked initially by legal and administrative changes in land use rights in the late 1980s, the construction boom escalated and spread across China after tax reform in 1994, when local governments, forced to generate more revenue on their own, increasingly turned to seizing land from longtime residents to resell to developers at huge profits (Cai 2007; Ding 2007). That such seizures resulted in common outcries of injustice, along with recurring spectacles of violence between huge wrecking crews and lone residents, have been widely reported through the Chinese blogosphere, international media, and human rights networks.<sup>1</sup>

Yet there has also been a growing, if more fitful, effort by the central government to improve regulatory checks and legal protections against the excesses of redevelopment at the local levels. Beginning with the introduction of the Administrative Litigation Law in 1989, which gave people the right to sue government officials for the first time, legal reforms further expanded through the 1990s and 2000s as the central government made moves to promote more globally aligned standards of “accountability” and “transparency” as part of China’s entry into the WTO.<sup>2</sup> These reforms culminated in the installment of private property protections in 2007 and in directives from both the State Council and the Supreme Court in 2011 that city developers avoid violent incidents in cases of forced removal.<sup>3</sup>

Initiated at the cusp of these latest reforms, the redevelopment of Lanes and Alleys came at a moment when the

old brute strategies for (un)building places through wholesale destruction and administrative fiat took a distinctive turn toward a less confrontational model of urban revitalization emphasizing “cultural protection” (*wenhua baohu*) and a “society ruled by law” (*fazhi shehui*). Such a shift in state sensibilities has been accompanied by a distinct dispersal of agency and accountability. This is a redrawing of the political landscape, as I show below, that has brought infrastructure and its various unruly parts to the fore, making both state claims and citizen protests ever more contingent on the lively collaboration of materials “underneath” the usual scenes of encounter.

In this article, I analyze the conditions through which certain workings of infrastructure come into focus as an enabling or disabling force in the course of everyday political struggles over the remaking of a Chinese neighborhood. I explore how redevelopment disputes unfold through increasingly distributed and diffused forms of agency as a result of expanding bureaucratic and legal reforms in China. As I show, such reforms have worked to attune citizens, as well as their government adversaries, to what we might call the “infrastructuralization” of state power (cf. Mann 1984). My research involved 15 months of policy analysis and fieldwork from 2009 to 2012 among residents and evictees of Fuzhou’s Lanes and Alleys district. Besides conducting participant-observation and interviews with current and former residents of the neighborhood, I also interviewed a variety of legal professionals and state workers involved in local redevelopment disputes, including administrative lawyers, planning officials, and migrant demolition workers. Additionally, I tracked eviction-and-demolition cases as they moved from the neighborhood into formal judicial settings, attending several public trials against city developers at both the district and intermediary-level courts.

Ultimately, by following the lead of residents like Mrs. Pei in thinking infrastructurally about redevelopment, I focus on the ways citizens and state actors negotiate various systems of (re)distribution at the ambiguous point of their disrepair in the built environment. I suggest that it is through the muted tensions of disrepair, oscillating between the reflexive and the habitual and between event and nonevent, that disputes over redevelopment increasingly play out in places like Lanes and Alleys across contemporary China. Here I am especially interested in the relationship between eventfulness and politicization as civilian protests gained new visibility in bureaucratic and legal settings at the same time that the violence of redevelopment took on new insidious and diffused forms.

Writings on infrastructure often point to its eventfulness at two distinct moments: first, at the point of introduction or upgrade, when it can come into public recognition as an iconic modern sign of the technological sublime and, second, at the moment of systemic breakdown or disaster, when it can become a spectacle of state failure and

national tragedy.<sup>4</sup> In between these two monumental points in its life cycle, infrastructure often can slip into invisibility as the embedded technical backdrop of social flows and exchanges, its operation and maintenance a seemingly mundane and arcane matter of “small” technicalities both barely perceptible and unworthy of significant social attention. Susan Star’s wry description of her ethnography of infrastructure as “the study of boring things” (1999:377) perhaps best captures this sense of the uneventful in the everyday operations of infrastructure.

By focusing on the ambiguous workings of disrepair, I am interested in the very tensions between the mundane and the eventful capacities of infrastructure. Disrepair marks a lively zone for the unfolding of citizen–state disputes. In the process of redevelopment, it sits murkily between ruination and renovation, where the accruing signs of wear and tear in a house or beneath a street have yet to rise into public recognition as a scene of imminent and tragic disaster or of necessary and praiseworthy reconstruction. In this way, it offers a vantage point to engage infrastructure as a sociotechnical ensemble of contingently allied forces, each of which can fray and break out from its embedded functioning as part of an otherwise neglected backdrop. In the throes of redevelopment, disrepair can invert or blur the distinctions between background and foreground. Even as its unfolding remains hidden and illegible, it can lead to a redistribution of the sensible across the political landscape (Rancière 2006).

Here I argue that infrastructures are more than just technical apparatuses for the mobilization and conversion of matter into legible human resources. Following the thinking of Jacques Rancière (2006), I suggest that infrastructures also work to cultivate a certain tacit “common sense” of the world and that world’s built-in or proper distribution of life chances and life energies. While I start from the topography of pipes and roads—the kind of technical objects iconic of “infrastructure”—I ultimately approach infrastructure not only through its conventional, state-centric form as public utilities but also through its broader political implications as a “style of structuration” mediating the everyday flow and order of things (Bennett 2005:445).

As an organizational force, infrastructure’s relative openness and flexibility in material form has been described variously in terms of the whole–part relations of sociotechnical “systems” (Edwards 2003), the nodal connections of “networks” (Castells 1996), and the heterogeneous alliances of “assemblages” (Bennett 2005).<sup>5</sup> Whether taking the shape of system, network, or assemblage, infrastructures usually have at least two things in common: (1) they configure lines of contact, circulation, and partitioning in social life, and (2) they are distinctly other-regarding in their operation. Specifically, as relations of relations, infrastructures typically manifest as second-order agents of distribu-

tion; they are partial objects always gesturing to other flows and transactions for their completion as meaningful social forms.<sup>6</sup>

Thinking infrastructurally, then, is not just a self-referential exercise for tracing the internal parts of a technical system; it demands an outward orientation to the resonance of things unfolding on other social planes and, in turn, to distributive forms of agency drawing efficacy from links to elsewhere and elsewhen. At the same time, as the *infra-* in *infrastructures* implies, such configurations are also supposed to sediment into their social surroundings, their design logics and distributive patterns becoming “second nature” in the organization of everyday life (Cronon 1992).<sup>7</sup> In this sense, to focus on an infrastructure’s disrepair is to trouble the presumed “nature” of such embedded forms—to raise questions of their relation to other relations and of their ethos of distribution.

In the remainder of the article, I examine the subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in people’s sense of the common grounds, as well as exceptional circumstances, for negotiating the tensions of redevelopment through accounts of infrastructural disrepair in their midst. Here I am not primarily interested in functionalist readings of the powers of infrastructure, through which redevelopment’s failures are measured only according to the contradictions between the legibility of official plans and the illegible spread of “corruption” or “incompetence” in practice. Instead of fixating on obvious dysfunctions, I highlight the working effects of disrepair by considering how infrastructures operate not only to support state projects of legibility (Scott 1998) but also to condition broader political sensibilities (Rancière 2006). By the latter, I mean to suggest how infrastructures can work through their very glitches and ongoing malfunctions to shake up common presuppositions of who and what counts, what measures and exchanges matter, in existing distributive orders. To trace such disturbances of sensibility, I consider three overlapping phases and distinct signs of disrepair in redevelopment disputes: (1) a shifting aesthetics of bureaucratic mediation related to eviction orders, (2) the unruly propensities of houses coming apart under contestation, and (3) the atmospherics of legal protests across neighborhood and courtroom settings. Each section of my discussion focuses on a different manifestation of infrastructure: as, respectively, a public system of state address and redress; an ensemble of building components, metrics, and protocols; and the ambient architecture or *mise-en-scène* of political disputes. Ultimately, by tracking the workings of disrepair through these often unassuming yet deeply material features of housing conflicts, I show how the “problem(s)” of redevelopment can become palpable, if not fully legible, as part of a changing common sense of “politics” and “law” in citizen–state struggles.

## The changing aesthetics of “Chai Na”

There is a country in the East called “Chai Na” (拆拿). Its politics are unlike that of other countries. It can’t help but *chai* (拆, knock down, demolish) and *na* (拿, take).

—Mr. “Five Willows,” Chinese netizen

In the past few years, “Chai Na” has become a favorite neologism in the Chinese blogosphere to describe the unseemly side of a nation undergoing a widespread and much-touted building boom. Netizens increasingly make dark jokes about living in Chai Na, where homes are seized and destroyed with relentless speed and impunity. Yet these jokes are peaking at a moment in which the face of Chai Na is not what it used to be. Consider, for instance, the once-ubiquitous and much-hated sign of the character *chai* (拆, to knock down, demolish) painted in bold red or white across the exteriors of condemned buildings (cf. Chau 2008; Zhang 2001, 2010). Once the public face of impending demolition, these giant signs have largely disappeared from new sites of urban redevelopment such as Fuzhou’s Lanes and Alleys neighborhood. In their stead, one is now more likely to find a scattered trail of bureaucratic notices left by a building’s front door informing its residents of the various legal grounds for and practical details of their removal. In contrast to the singular sign of *chai*, the wordy texts of these notices gesture to a discernible shift in the state aesthetics of demolition: from a strong-armed style of command to a more governmentalized one emphasizing legal reasoning and protocol (Figure 1).

In Fuzhou, this was a shift that officials began to promote heavily in 2006 with a flood of public announcements and news stories about the city’s triumphant take back of Lanes and Alleys from the famed Hong Kong business magnate Li Jiacheng (Li Ka-shing). Since 1993, Li’s company had held the development rights to the neighborhood and had been busy tearing down old buildings and whole blocks to make way for new high-rise complexes. While this work had taken place with the city’s cooperation for over a decade, following Lanes and Alleys’ selection as a nationally protected historical and cultural district, the city decided to end Li’s contract by citing widespread public alarm over the destruction of three renowned blocks in the neighborhood during his reign. Moving away from the goal of high-rise development, the city’s new plan aimed to restore Lanes and Alleys as a “living museum” of Ming–Qing architecture and, in the process, draw new tourism and cultural prestige to the city. Moreover, as a sign of the municipality’s new-found respect for “law” and “culture,” the plan offered some homeowners new options to stay in or return to the neighborhood instead of facing permanent eviction. Along with these new rights for residents, an array of strategies for dealing with buildings—from active preservation to retention to facade restoration—suggested that demolition was be-

coming a last resort. In the city’s well-publicized new plan for Lanes and Alleys, 28 buildings with state-recognized status as historically significant structures were identified for special protections and investments, and another 131 old buildings were earmarked as priorities to be preserved rather than simply torn down.<sup>8</sup>

Lanes and Alleys residents never failed to recall their optimism at the time of this plan’s announcement and, in fact, often pulled out worn copies of the actual plan, with particular stipulations and clauses underlined, to show me just how far the local government had strayed from its own stated intentions. While the *chai* sign may have disappeared from the built landscape, the pace of eviction and demolition only seems to have intensified under the aegis of “historic preservation.” Less than two years after the new plan was put into action in 2007, Lanes and Alleys had gone from over 3,700 registered households to less than 200 still in residence.<sup>9</sup> “People’s ancestral homes are still being taken by force,” a longtime Lanes and Alleys resident explained in 2009. “Only now when they want a piece of land, they’ll say someone’s ‘breaking regulations’ (*weizhangde*), that it’s a ‘nonconforming building’ (*weizhang jianzhu*) ... an ‘eyesore’ (*bushun yan*).” As another resident put it, “It’s still *forced* destruction (*qiangchai*) ... but now they say it’s Lanes and Alleys’ own residents who are the wreckers of Lanes and Alleys!”

Despite the promotion of more legal protections, the new plan had not limited the field of destruction so much as multiplied the formal reasons and possibilities for a building’s ruination, dispersing agency and blame for eviction-and-demolition beyond the singular figure of “the state.” This is not to suggest, however, that demolition had become a simple game of blaming the victim. A building could be deemed “nonconforming” or an “eyesore” not just because of the intentions and actions of some local resident; its sorry condition could just as likely be attributed to some unruly elements of nature or unfortunate historical circumstances beyond any resident’s or, for that matter, any state agent’s control. Accident and intentionality were often difficult to sort out in the devolution of a house into a “problem” beyond repair.

Such confusion, in fact, could help expedite eviction-and-demolition by rendering state power illegible in the tangle of human and nonhuman interactions. People in Lanes and Alleys, for instance, loved to talk about a particular family in the neighborhood who had valiantly fought off city orders for eviction and demolition until a fire mysteriously broke out at their home. Was the fire just an ill-timed accident sparked by degrading electrical wires, as some officials claimed, or was it part of the city’s larger plot to evict the family? While it was easier to point to state agendas in the past, when eviction-and-demolition typically took the form of large wrecking crews and police dragging residents out of their homes, who could be blamed when it





**Figure 1.** The old signs for building demolition (top) versus the new bureaucratic notices (bottom). Top photo taken by Li Weihua in Kunming, China, in 2011. Bottom photos by Julie Y. Chu in Fuzhou, China, in 2012.

was an outbreak of fire that forced those same residents to leave?

In the new era of development through preservation, state power had not become more “transparent” so much as its opacity had been dispersed through an expanded web of bureaucratic mediation. This shift was reminiscent of what Michael Mann (1984) once described as “infrastructural power,” which, in contradistinction to the top-down style of “despotic power,” relied on the logistical (re)distribution and spreading interpenetration of state and civilian forces. Public notices and formal hearings, city plans, and housing documents now aimed to routinize, if not dispel, ongoing conflicts over redevelopment by simultaneously narrowing and proliferating the sites of accountability for making claims and counterclaims about the ruination (or necessary protection) of buildings. In Fuzhou, a substantial

set of city regulations on land requisition and demolition now delegated responsibility for eviction-and-demolition across a half-dozen district and city organs, from the City Planning Office to the Neighborhood Committee to the District Office for Demolition Management. While these units were supposed to work both as a team and as regulatory checks against one another, in practice they often appeared to operate as uncoordinated parts of an increasingly intricate and muddled program of action, each simultaneously broadening and diffusing the field for assigning agency and blame for state violations. Often it was hard to tell exactly which departments were responsible for dispatching the various state agents that showed up at people’s houses with public notices, not-so-veiled threats, or sledgehammers and bulldozers in tow. In lieu of the singularizing sign of centralized command, the aesthetics of state

engagement had become a diffused jumble of white noise and red herrings.

Moreover, the very paperwork meant to clarify the legal reasons and channels of redress had a way of going astray. Far from being stabilizing instruments of knowledge—a Latourian “immutable mobile” par excellence (Latour 1986)—city documents proved to be quite vulnerable as delegates of legal “transparency.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike the painted *chai* signs that used to signal a building’s demise, paper notices hastily tacked on a wall and exposed to the weather could easily fade, rip, and become illegible or simply fall or blow away in a gust of wind. Similarly, orders for demolition could fail to reach their intended recipient when left obscured or crumpled by someone’s front door or sent to the wrong place because of clerical “errors” in the entry of address on the form. The latter was an especially popular source of complaint among residents who suspected foul play in the new bureaucratic malfunctions.

Ultimately, while the increased emphasis on law and preservation did open up more formal channels than ever for negotiating with “the state,” such expansion also seemed to be accompanied by a persistence in the informalities of state intimidation. In fact, new government promotions of law and bureaucratic protocol only seemed to heighten this duality between formal and informal forces of state power. Such duality is perhaps best captured by the following popular saying currently circulating through Lanes and Alleys and elsewhere in China:

You talk “rule of law” with [the state], they act like a thug with you.

You act like a thug with them, they talk “rule of law” with you.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to suggest that state power was less “thuggish” before the new emphasis on legal reforms in China. As the saying above indicated, talking “rule of law” could not get rid of state thuggery altogether. What this new reflexivity about the law did, however, was push state violence into ever more elusive and distributed forms. To elaborate on this slippery relation of state violence to law, I now turn to the ambiguous forces of disrepair working through the material infrastructure of Lanes and Alleys itself.

### Brick by brick, (de)materializing propensities

We see the building and not the plaster of its walls, the words and not the ink with which they were written. In reality, of course, the materials are still there and continue to mingle and react as they have always done, forever threatening the things they comprise with dissolution or even “dematerialization.”

—Tim Ingold, “Materials against Materiality”

Liang Biao said he did not appreciate that a house was more than just shelter, a mere place to live, until his own house in Lanes and Alleys started to come apart in bits and pieces during his more than yearlong standoff against city orders for eviction and demolition. Taking me down a narrow alley off the barren lot where his home once stood, Liang regularly patted the walls of buildings on either side of the passage as if to make sure their solidity was not a mere mirage. At one point, he gestured for me to join him in this exercise and feel for the distinctive grain of a set of stones lining the bottom third of a firewall around someone’s house. Guiding me to two stones in particular, he traced the faint but distinct marks of 12 characters engraved into their surface. Mixed in with the plain stones of the wall, here were two old steles marking the lives of people who had once made the stones a corner of their home (Figure 2). An outsider visiting Lanes and Alleys, he noted, would see nothing here but a wall, a mundane thing hardly worth stopping for on a stroll through the neighborhood. Only someone like him—“a *yuanzhumin*” (original inhabitant, aboriginal), as he put it—who had grown up playing in this alley, exploring its nooks and crannies and hearing old tales of its residents’ exploits, could see past the brute fact of wall to the social life of the stones that composed and animated the neighborhood. “Ancient houses like these speak in details,” Liang explained. “In the old days, how tall your house was, what kind of roof it had, how thick the pillars were, these all had something to say about social status and economic prosperity.” It was never just the house as a whole, he added, but a house composed just so in all its specific parts—the roof, the pillars, and the stones all mingling with each other and with their various human cohabitants—through which a family’s genealogy and moral lessons could be glimpsed and grasped through generations. This appreciation for the house in all its lively and collaborative parts was precisely what city developers failed to see, Liang complained, when they sent out rag-tag crews of migrant workers and young thugs to smash up an intricately carved front door or punch a gaping hole in a wall where commemorative stones such as the ones in the alley might have stood.

Of course, city developers also had their own ideas of the details that mattered when they sorted the neighborhood’s structures into houses deserving protection and those requiring demolition. Whether through “the market” or “the plan,” city developers invoked different “wholes” for judging a house’s parts. On the one hand, through the commercial matrix of price and square meter, a house could be valued as property to be variously kept, divided, seized, or sold according to its marketability. On the other hand, through new planning measures of “public interest,” such as historical value and environmental friendliness, a house could be marked for special stewardship or condemned as a “nonconforming building.” This latter category had



**Figure 2.** The wall (left) and its detailed engravings (right) in Lanes and Alleys. Photos by Julie Y. Chu, Fuzhou, China, in 2011.

become an especially popular catchall for consigning all sorts of buildings to demolition, for reasons ranging from the legalistic (unauthorized additions, zoning problems) to the aesthetic (architectural eyesore, no historical value) to the material (poor physical condition, posing public hazard). Through these various metrics, the house could become a different ensemble of materials and, in turn, reveal hidden propensities for yielding “price” or posing “hazards” that had not previously been of concern to residents thinking only of the house-as-home.

When redevelopment came to Lanes and Alleys, most people like Liang were not necessarily opposed to the commercial valuation and sale of their homes. They were, however, outraged by what they saw as the insulting terms of developers’ offers, which averaged 3,000 RMB per square meter (approximately US\$495) in an area where most real estate was priced between 15,000 and 18,000 RMB per square meter (approximately US\$2,500–3,000).<sup>12</sup> While a few residents were able to wrangle better compensation through formal negotiations, most still came out feeling that the sums offered did not fairly value their house’s actual parts. Liang himself was one of the regretful many who tried to stave off eviction after completing what he considered an unsatisfying and disingenuous process of negotiation. Ironically, it was while trying to renegotiate a better deal so he could leave the neighborhood with some dignity that Liang became increasingly attached to the material resonance and historicity of his own home. When he was unable to sway developers on price, his nostalgic claims about the pricelessness of his house only seemed to grow alongside his complaints about the city’s plan for preservation, which he dismissed as a scheme to exploit the neighborhood’s “historical value” for the commercial benefit of a few.

When negotiations over price failed to persuade people to relocate, the planning metric of “nonconformity” provided another means to remove residents and their homes. No house seemed safe from falling into the category of “nonconforming building,” even among the 159 buildings listed in the plan for special protections. For the first two years after the initiation of the new plan, Mrs. Pei had thought her house was off-limits to the wrecking crews since it was one of the area’s nine buildings deemed worthy of the highest level of state protection as having nationally recognized cultural significance. During this time, Mrs. Pei and her husband had managed to stay put while most of their neighbors were cleared out, even though city developers had been pushing them to sell their property or at least relocate temporarily so that workers could come in and do a thorough renovation. Fearing that any move, even temporary, would allow the city to seize their home for good, the couple had refused to negotiate about relocation at all, regardless of whatever official offers and informal threats came their way. Slowly but surely, however, their house began to fall apart around them. When construction crews working nearby would knock out their electricity or water, it would take weeks and even months to get the city to reconnect them. Sometimes sewage from outside and below would mysteriously seep through the walls and floors. When their roof began to leak, no one the couple called would come fix it, since they were all afraid to work without special approval from the city to make changes to a nationally protected house. Then, one spring afternoon in 2010, Mrs. Pei and her husband heard a crashing sound from the back of their home. When they reached that part of the house, they found men with sledgehammers busy knocking down the room from the outside in; all the furniture in the room had either vanished or was in bits and



pieces. The whole room needed to go, a uniformed man told them, because the city had declared it “nonconforming.”

Less than two months later, after a second wrecking crew showed up to take down another wall deemed “nonconforming,” Mrs. Pei asked me to immediately come to her home to bear witness to the material traces of this newest attack. Amid a tangle of crumbling bricks and broken furniture, she angrily described how another small crew had arrived once again at the back of the property unannounced, where they swiftly knocked down an old perimeter wall before anyone could try to stop them. Even worse, this time they appeared to have robbed the house of a perfectly sound and historically precious firewall, instead of dismantling the deteriorating inner wall that had been marked officially for removal. Showing me a diagram of the wall targeted in the city’s demolition order, Mrs. Pei noted that there was no way the narrow rectangular structure the document described as a public hazard could be referring to the house’s much wider outer wall, which had been carefully designed over 500 years earlier to withstand the elements, including the spread of fire. This was no ordinary wall, Mrs. Pei insisted, layered with the cheap red brick you find in new buildings. It was a “blue brick” wall, she noted, made of distinctive materials gathered from the sandy beaches around Fuzhou ages ago and molded into huge solid blocks, in a way that no one makes anymore. When the wrecking crew came this time, Mrs. Pei complained, they did just not abscond with more of the house’s contents; they also plundered the wall they had dismantled for its very parts, trucking off with all the blue bricks in sellable condition.

Rumor had it in Lanes and Alleys that some wrecking crews made up of poor migrant workers were not paid in cash for their efforts but in all the construction materials they could strip from old buildings and take away to resell on their own. Down another alley from Mrs. Pei’s home, the remaining residents of an old factory housing complex recalled seeing workers not only smash brick walls and then cart off loads of good bricks from the rubble but also pick off every last bit of usable piping and wire from rooms they were in the process of demolishing. As in Mrs. Pei’s two encounters, this work seemed to operate best through quiet surprise rather than heavy-handed confrontation, with crews of often no more than three or four sneaking in from some back corner to target just one discrete part of a home—a wall, a room, even just a pair of doors—which they could easily dispatch in a few quick motions, running off with the spoils before residents could respond. Whether the materials being collected were actually appropriated by workers themselves or were destined for some city coffer, it was clear that the breakup of houses in this way had sharpened people’s sense of the lively propensities of even the smallest and most embedded parts to yield value or damaging loss. This awareness was not only evident in Liang Biao’s nostalgia for recuperating the social

lives of stones and other inalienable features of a home but also in the realization by Mrs. Pei and others that if there was commodity potential to be found in any bit of a house, it should rightfully be the residents’ to claim and sort out (Figure 3).

It was also clear that forced removal itself had become more of a piecemeal operation, unfolding through speed and stealth rather than through sharp confrontational acts of wholesale demolition. If big public signs of *chai* were no longer desirable in the era of preservation and legal reform, neither were the old spectacles of state destruction, when local officials, in a show of overwhelming force, would send out 200 men brandishing sticks alongside bulldozers to intimidate and drive a single family out of their home. Such scenes, after all, had provided the provocative backdrop for some of the most notorious cases of forced removal over the past decade, enabling disputes to crystallize into iconic images of last-standing houses in a devastated landscape and into such newsworthy scandals of violence as the bulldozing of a house with some of its residents still inside and evictees’ staging of desperate protests through self-immolation. While such attention-grabbing “incidents” were not unavoidable altogether, at the very least, big acts of direct confrontation were becoming strategies of last resort in favor of small crews engaged in discrete acts of smash-and-run.

In recent years, one of the most frequently cited reasons for legal reform in China was the reduction of incidents of violence in disputes between citizens and state actors.<sup>13</sup> Carrying out eviction-and-demolition “without incident” had become a crucial measure of a local government’s success in contemporary projects of redevelopment. The last thing city developers wanted to do under the new legal regime was to create political martyrs out of pesky citizens and galvanize unwanted social attention and protests against their cause. Achieving this end did not require the disappearance of state violence so much as the diffusion of its eventfulness and public visibility as “incidents” in the political landscape. One way to accomplish this diffusion was to channel disputes through paper trails into the formal settings of legal and bureaucratic engagement, where their eventfulness could be contained on state terms of accountability and resolution. Another way was to work through and with the lively materials of the built environment itself by recruiting its unruly and decomposing parts into the state project of demolition.

As Liang Biao, Mrs. Pei, and many others in Lanes and Alleys learned, a house could turn from comforting shelter into something uncooperative and even threatening to its very inhabitants. This outcome seemed especially likely when a house had bits and pieces already in disrepair that could be appropriated as state evidence of an owner’s negligence or nudged further along the road to ruin through timely disruptions of their infrastructural connections, like





**Figure 3.** Bricks as trash (left) and as commodity (right) in the demolition of Lanes and Alleys houses. Photos by Julie Y. Chu, Fuzhou, China, in 2011.



**Figure 4.** Results of smash-and-run wrecking crews. Photos taken by Julie Y. Chu, Fuzhou, China, in 2011.

sewage pipes and electrical lines. If a house and its residents remained obdurate against such infrastructural forces of eviction-and-demolition, disrepair could be further accelerated through a few choice takedowns of building components, such as the removal of the front doors or the wrecking of a wall (Figure 4). In lieu of top-down and total destruction by legible state forces, a house could be encouraged through the dematerializing propensities of its own parts to come untethered and slowly slide, bit by bit, from disrepair through “nonconformity” and into final ruin (cf. Ingold 2007). Building materials once loosened from their association to the house-as-home could fall into a different working ensemble—their agency merging with city metrics, broken pipes, and migrant wrecking crews to set up the house-for-chai.

In Liang Biao’s case, it had taken around a year and a total of nine wrecking crews—most of them of the smash-and-run variety—before his house finally turned into an unlivable pile of rubble. During this time, Liang had been furiously

studying up on all kinds of law while working his way through various bureaucratic negotiations. At one hearing at the District Office of Demolition Management, Liang demanded redress for the partial destruction of his house by pointing to damages caused by wrecking crews on several occasions—from a torn-out window to stolen doors to a gaping hole punched into a wall. Officials, he said, largely tried to disavow these acts by pointing the finger at other government units. When Liang would not relent in the increasingly heated argument, one official tried to shrug off his accusations by directing him to consider the uneventful and hardly verifiable form of the smaller acts of destruction. As Liang recalled, “He said, the first few incidents you’re talking about really don’t count [since] there was no fuss or fanfare [to the destruction].” Later, when he finally took the local government to court, officials would only acknowledge their role in the two most legally justified acts of violence, including the final demolition, when the bulldozers came with a huge wrecking crew and with uniformed cops

carrying official city orders. While these two admissions of demolition seemed egregious enough, Liang told me that the remaining seven acts of disavowed violence made him even more furious. The latter, after all, enabled most of the state violence—elusively tied to unmarked crews of migrant workers—to disperse into the built environment and to mingle its destructive forces with ongoing “natural” wear and tear of the house’s existing parts. In this way, his very house was turned against him and made to conspire with the formalities of legal reasoning and paperwork, not to mention with various damaging forces of nature, to force him finally off his property and out of the neighborhood for good. “China is at its most ugly when you’re looking for the law,” Liang concluded about his struggles against demolition. “It’s ugly at every level of political organization,” he continued, “because [whether you’re] young or old, they’ll find a way to smash you with the bricks from your own house.”

Yet, if the unruly bricks of a house could be turned against its inhabitants, they could also be recruited back as allies in defending a home. After all, it was not uncommon to find the leftover bricks of a demolished part of a house reassembled into a formidable arsenal near the entrance, where they could be readily thrown at the next wrecking crew or any bullying cop who dared to come in. Making do with every last bit, even the smashed-up bricks left for trash, people continued to mobilize their house as shelter or, better yet, as a reconfigured fortress armed with its own patchwork weapons—a literal bricolage—from the materials primed for their own ruin. Creative destruction, it turned out, was not just the province of city developers. In fact, as I show in the final section, law itself as political infrastructure and as instrument of “the state” could also sometimes be turned against its own professed aims.

### The atmospherics of law

Just inside the front gate of a drab 1980s housing complex in Lanes and Alleys, once part of a state factory and now belonging to its retired workers, two distinct spaces of protest divided the ramshackle courtyard facing out toward the newly paved street. On the right-hand side about a third of the way in from the gate, residents had hung a white vinyl curtain emblazoned with three giant characters proclaiming “Line of Demarcation” (Xue Fen Ling). Behind the curtain, a huge assortment of bottles filled with human urine and feces overflowed from a broken-down cabinet next to a substantial pile of misshapen bricks and stones. Any state agent who crossed the line, the curtain warned, should expect to be defiled by an exploding shit or urine bomb or have a brick thrown in his face by the residents still defending this place (Figure 5).

Across from this very public display of makeshift weapons, on the left, a large board plastered with var-

ious city notices, formal petitions, newspaper clippings, and other documents told another story of battles already fought and largely lost offsite in the formal arenas of law and bureaucracy (Figure 6). Explaining the connection between this chronicle of past struggles and the zone of anticipated battle across the courtyard, a document entitled “Letter Written in Blood” described the utter failures of the law to protect this building’s residents from repeated “invasive pillaging” by city developers and their wrecking crews. “Given the unbearable situation,” the letter concluded, “we can only remain in combat readiness and . . . use our own fresh blood to defend respect for the law, safeguard our own lawful rights and interests [and] defend our homes.”

There is a curious tension in this document between residents’ marked disgust at the persistent failures of “rule according to law” and their adamant attempts to couch their continual protests in the very idioms and claims of law. In my discussions with Lanes and Alleys residents about their struggles against city developers, I was always struck by how much people loved to hate the law even as they could not seem to keep themselves from getting sucked into its dramas and from reanimating its aesthetics. People routinely told me matter-of-factly how useless they thought the law was even as they loved to cite intricate details of various legal provisions—from city planning measures to property rights law to constitutional amendments—to explain all the ways they had been wronged. While they seemed to have little to no faith in the functioning of law, they also felt the need to describe their problems through a legalistic trail of paper and photographic evidence, showing me document after document—sometimes starting with their national identification card—as they narrated the different stages of their struggles against forced removal.

As people’s houses, along with their larger neighborhood, continued to be whittled away in bits and pieces all around them, it seemed that documents were among the few things residents could still accrue and hold on to; they became a kind of insulation against ongoing exposure to the threats of eviction-and-demolition. Even when ineffectual in official negotiations, paperwork and legal language continued to pervade the everyday stylings and atmospherics of protest, for example, by being visibly plastered all over the courtyard described above as part of the building occupants’ last stand against forced removal. In this way, law itself proved to be integral to the social lining of eviction-and-demolition disputes, materializing in the neighborhood as an infrastructural force in what might be best described as the struggle over “climate control” (Sloterdijk 2005).

Redevelopment, after all, did not just bring physical transformations to Lanes and Alleys; it also brought a distinctive change in the air. In fact, these two aspects were intimately entangled in a common local theory of state violence as the “ruination of the atmosphere” (*pohai qifen*). As many people saw it, the well-being of a place depended





**Figure 5.** Curtain marking the “Line of Demarcation” (top left) for fighting eviction with an arsenal of bricks (bottom) and excrement and urine bombs (bottom and top right). Photos taken at a Lanes and Alleys housing complex in Fuzhou, China, by Julie Y. Chu in 2010.

as much on the solidity of the built environment as on the management of the airy distribution of vital energies (*qi*) across the social landscape. As a material configuration of such distribution, infrastructures could be said to provide the crucial ventilation as well as insulation for regulating the balance between the cold and windy forces of nature and the hot and dense energies of human gatherings.<sup>14</sup> As redevelopment unfolded, one of the intensifying challenges for residents was to hold their ground amid the dissipation of *renqi*—the unique “human atmosphere” that made a place familiar and habitable. Once characterized as a bustling neighborhood full of inviting “heat and noise” (*renao*), Lanes and Alleys had come to be seen as a decidedly yin place—cold, dank, sinister.<sup>15</sup> It had become “more

graveyard than home,” as one woman put it, where those fighting eviction lingered “like hungry ghosts” amid the remains of bulldozed houses and vanished neighbors.

Far from being simply metaphorical, this shift in atmosphere could be felt infrastructurally through the leaky roofs, punctured walls, and other breakdowns of home insulation, as people found themselves increasingly exposed to the elements as well as to the sheer flood of rats and other vermin driven to the last-occupied houses in search of dwindling food and warmth. Such change in the air was also palpable in the very stench that periodically assaulted the remaining residents as it wafted into their homes from the leftover piles and cesspools of building waste abandoned in vacant lots or from the sewage lines accidentally ruptured



**Figure 6.** The documentary traces of legal battles fought offsite at a Lanes and Alleys housing complex in Fuzhou, China. Photo by Julie Y. Chu in 2010.

by construction crews while digging up a nearby street. As testament against the degrading climate of Lanes and Alleys, the shit and urine bombs at the old housing complex promised to redirect the polluting stench of redevelopment back at encroaching city workers.

But what can be made of the fact that these shit bombs had been assembled not simply as weapons against legal orders but also as part of a statement in defense of “respect for the law”? It is tempting to read people’s mixed messages about “the law” simply as evidence of the dysfunctions of legal reform in housing disputes, that is, as an articulation of the very tensions between law’s promise in the form of abstract stipulations and its failures in actual practice to protect those it claimed to be protecting. To analyze law in this way, however, would only touch on its instrumental logic instead of dealing with its equally important, if not more crucial, operative potential. By *operative*, I mean the ways in which law could lend itself to all sorts of unexpected tactics and effects beyond its functionalist claims as a “system” of well-fitted purposes and parts. It was, after all, law’s operative capacities, not its stated aims or particular ideological hold, that seemed to motivate people to come back to it, even after several failures, and to put themselves again and again through the rituals of administrative negotiations and courtroom hearings. Most people did not expect law to do what it claimed it could do; that is, they understood its instrumental reason to be something of a joke or a sham. Cynical about law’s ideological promise, many also suspected that the entire system of legal codes and principles, including its recent reforms, was being rigged for the rich and

powerful against them. Yet law could fail on its own terms and, at the same time, still enable other social projects and political effects beyond the narrow limits of legal imagination.

Take, for instance, the pursuit of administrative lawsuits over forced removal in Fuzhou. If one only looked at the national rate of favorable court judgments for plaintiffs, which has never surpassed 15 percent in any given year, suing the state clearly seemed ineffectual as a strategy of political redress (Liang 2008:46). Yet Lanes and Alleys residents regularly told me that the judicial decision was really not that important to their litigious efforts. Even with zero chance of winning, one could initiate a lawsuit and draw heat to a cooling case by enabling litigants to gather otherwise slippery opponents and dispersed allies—from aloof bureaucrats and former neighbors to simpatico strangers and the occasional reporter—into the same charged setting of the courtroom trial. In the best-case scenario, it could even force developers to settle generously out of court by threatening to turn a commonplace dispute in the neighborhood into a buzzworthy “incident” in the house of law.<sup>16</sup>

The neighborhood, after all, was not the only place experiencing a climatic shift under redevelopment. Just as Lanes and Alleys was becoming cold and desolate, the court itself was turning into a hothouse of tension, where once isolated and dispersed evictees could reassemble in renewed “heat and noise” (*renao*) to air their frustrations through public trials. Thanks to the advent of administrative law in the early 1990s, especially civilians’ right to sue the state, people estranged from their own homes were



growing ever more familiar with the social environs and intimate workings of the courts. That such workings were out of order hardly seemed to surprise anyone. What was perhaps more unexpected was how visibly and viscerally one could sense the court's disrepair simply by approaching and entering through its doors.

Over the two years that I followed evictees through various lawsuits and appeals in Fuzhou, I was routinely struck by the nondescript and shabby appearance of the courts, especially those at the district level where litigants first engaged their opponents in public trials. As houses of a sort in their own right, most courts seemed to be, structurally, barely a notch above the worn homes over which residents were fighting developers in Lanes and Alleys. Perhaps befitting their lack of importance in the political landscape, local courts largely sat in obscure corners of the city, their dingy exteriors bearing little sign of official status beyond a flagpole and some security presence around the front entrance. As one disappointed resident put it after accompanying me for the first time to a public trial, "The court here is a bit embarrassing (*diulian*) . . . I mean, it has none of that dignified feeling of 'law' that you imagine from watching [court hearings on] TV."

Inside, this sense of degradation only seemed to be enhanced by the unsteady ventilation and lighting in the hallways and other public areas where litigants and other civilians frequently milled around before and after courtroom proceedings. Typical of other state buildings open to the general public, courthouses in Fuzhou had a way of putting common citizens in their lowly place by reserving their best infrastructural resources, such as air conditioning in the heat of summer, only for privileged state workers and visiting elites. When I once pointed out such inequities of air circulation to the people I sweated alongside in the court's hallway on a humid August day, everyone seemed to agree that they were just par for the course, endemic to the broken-down system of legal adjudication itself. "Well, of course!" one man next to me exclaimed before launching into an extended complaint of the injustice of having to endure such stifling heat. It was, after all, only the *daguan* (important judges and officials) in the building, he noted, who could expect steady temperature control and go about their business in comfortable climate bubbles behind office and courtroom doors.

Yet disrepair could also energize a seething crowd, especially when courtrooms opened their doors to the ritual airing of grievances, including the dramatization of law's own dysfunctions, during public trials. For, once a court was in session, a litigant capable of drawing a "hot and noisy" audience could often turn a staid courtroom into a venue for the rowdy public hazing of insolent officials and indifferent judges. For instance, it was common to see court proceedings in eviction-and-demolition cases interrupted by angry outbursts from people in the audience, who would re-

spond to particular fighting words from the plaintiff's side or certain arrogant gestures by the defendants by spontaneously jumping out of their seats and yelling insults at the officials on trial: "You motherfucking liar! You're all nothing but feudal bandits!" and "Just go to hell, you useless savage beast!" Judges who sometimes tried to call the court back to order in these situations were just as likely to be ignored as they were to become additional targets of the audience's rage and scorn. Often the entire court staff, including the judges, the clerk, and the guards, seemed content to let these outbursts simply run their course rather than risk escalating the courtroom tensions through their own interventions. Most people, after all, doubted that such audience heckling, let alone the actual formal arguments made in the hearing, could make a real difference in the judges' final deliberation. This seemed especially true when cases were flagged as "political" by state authorities from "above" who had influence over judicial careers and courthouse budgets. Yet even if local courts could not be relied on for fair hearings, a lawsuit could still force judges and officials to face angry citizens up close and go through the shared ritual motions of a kangaroo trial. At least for the duration of a courtroom hearing, state workers on the defense had to sit there and passively take whatever incendiary accusations and vile curses people lobbed their way.

No doubt the courtroom was supposed to be a kind of pressure valve for managing the intensity of protests by containing the eventfulness of citizen-state confrontation to the legal ritual of the trial. If audiences could sound off in the space-time of a judicial hearing, their outbursts were also supposed to be heard only as background noise and procedural interruptions, their passions dissipating at the conclusion of the trial when all parties were expected to disperse from the scene of adjudication. Yet, while the event of the trial often ended in an anticlimactic way, it was also surprising what could happen on the uneventful margins of the court when state actors crossed paths with citizens lingering in the galley or doorways after a hearing had run its course. For instance, at the end of one especially demoralizing trial—a 15-minute nonstarter—in which the stern judge seemed to do everything in his power to stifle the plaintiff's capacity to speak, I was stunned to see this same judge stop briefly on his way out of court and apologize to a man in the audience by admitting to having bowed to "pressure from above" to bury that man's case. In discussing an even stranger show of sympathy, another litigant described his disorientation when one of the city defendants, who had seemed the most hostile during his hearing, came up to him afterward with a sheepish look on his face and then proceeded to give him a friendly pat on the back before exiting the courtroom. Recalling the brief camaraderie sparked by this official's gesture, the litigant explained, "It was as if he was saying 'It's not *me* . . . I'm just like *you* in hating this stinking corrupt government.'"

Sometimes, like the fraying parts of an old building being targeted for demolition, disaffected state workers could even be pushed over the edge of disrepair into active complicity with citizens against their own state unit. At the district courthouse where Lanes and Alleys' most famous protester, Mrs. Li, tried repeatedly to file a new lawsuit against the city government, one clerk told her that, like so many others who had been warned about her troublemaking antics, he could not formally receive and register her court submission without risking being fired by his superiors. But after letting Mrs. Li curse him out for being no better than crummy toilet paper wiping the ass of the state, the clerk also surprised her by offering to coach her on a better way to force the district court to formally recognize her case. He then proceeded to explain how she could resend her legal papers via certified mail so they would arrive automatically at the courthouse with an official proof of receipt.

In the end, Mrs. Li did not get very far by following the advice of the apologetic court clerk. Perhaps he was just engaging in another ruse of officialdom with her, playing dumb in his confessions of bureaucratic disaffection and offers of informal help in "talking law" with the state. Whatever the intentions, however, what was certain about these encounters was the distinct sensibility they galvanized at the threshold of legal happenings. Uneventful yet palpable, something lingered in the courtroom air that was neither sharp antagonism nor deadened cynicism but more like empathy amid mutual degradation. In that shared zone of disrepair somewhere between ruination and the promises of legal reform, who knew what fraying parts might do when given the chance to finally break apart from old infrastructures and mingle with outside forces?

### Conclusion: Disrepair in-action

Three years after the new trees first appeared on Nanhou Street, nothing and yet everything seemed to have changed in Lanes and Alleys. Despite residents' predictions, the trees had survived whatever infrastructural hazards "from below" that Mrs. Pei had so dramatically pointed to beneath the street. Yet the fact that they were far from flourishing—still small, spindly, and unable to cast the needed green shade—was also taken by the old residents of the neighborhood as a sign of their own continual, if insidious, degradation. Were they dying or thriving? In the liminal zone of disrepair, everything still teetered uncertainly between ruination and renovation.

Not unlike these stunted trees, a number of residents also remained in an ambiguous state, neither finding a satisfying resolution nor facing head-on destruction amid ongoing eviction-and-demolition threats and legal dead ends. At the old factory housing complex, the makeshift bombs and the stockpile of bricks still waited for city developers to cross the Line of Demarcation. The fact that a large wreck-

ing crew had yet to confront these residents could be read as a small victory for those still willing to fight for their homes, as well as for "respect for the law," to a bloody and spectacular end. Yet while these residents kept bracing for some violent event to unfold in their courtyard, the building also continued its quiet erosion with the population declining from 35 to 20 households. This attrition seemed to have occurred "without incident," as city developers desired, accomplished not through some attention-grabbing battle in the neighborhood but, rather, through what officials celebrated as the "successful completion of agreements" through routine bureaucratic and legal mediation.<sup>17</sup>

At their best, redevelopment plans like the one in Lanes and Alleys aimed to banalize citizen-state conflicts by simultaneously expanding the infrastructure of legal mediation while enabling agents of disrepair to disperse and discreetly do their work through the fraying materials of the built environment. In this way, the infrastructural forces of both the law and the neighborhood converged to keep the happenings of eviction-and-demolition from congealing into problematic "incidents." They did this by redistributing the eventfulness of citizen protests from the front lines of neighborhood violence into an aesthetic jumble of bureaucratic mediation, on one hand, and into the controlled climate of the court hearing, on the other.

Yet, as I have tried to sketch through the overflow of disrepair into the courthouse itself, the infrastructure of law did not just function as a hydraulic model for containing and diffusing the pressures from "below" and "above." The event of the trial, as it turned out, was often the least interesting happening that took place whenever a lawsuit over eviction-and-demolition brought dispersed former neighbors and slippery state workers together. Whatever could be said of the dysfunctions of "the law," it was also through the very expansion of a legal apparatus for suing the state—including the literal opening of the court's rooms and hallways to the increasing onslaught of litigious citizens—that occasional sparks of empathy and even active complicity could ignite on the infrastructural margins of the trial. While both officials and citizens mostly fixated on the drama of "the event" in the unfolding of redevelopment struggles, it may have been through such uneventful happenings that the operative promise of the law ultimately could be found.

In focusing on the political possibilities of disrepair in the built environment, I have honed in on the paradoxical capacities of infrastructure to both dramatize and routinize citizen-state struggles over the material and social degradation of houses—both in the neighborhood and in the courts—in the wake of new forms of violence in urban redevelopment. While some recent ethnographic work on "infrastructural violence" helpfully points to the ways material forms of distributed agency spread injustice and abjection in the world (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012),<sup>18</sup> what struggles over eviction-and-demolition reveal is not

the inevitable conditioning of “bare life” through such violence. Rather, what I have tried to sketch is a more open and unpredictable climate of creative destruction, capable of a surprising play of alliances among an ensemble of fraying parts—both human and nonhuman, citizen and state agents. In the process of coming apart, the materials of a house had propensities not only to do damage but also to yield surprising and heterogeneous value; they could turn into sellable commodities or newly prized heirlooms; they could become damning evidence of needed demolition or makeshift weapons for defending a home. The same could be said for the disaffected city workers worn down by angry citizens amid neighborhood and court struggles. Though cracks in officialdom may not appear now (or ever) as serious challenges to state pressures from “above,” what official gestures of empathy and complicity point to are more subtle shifts in people’s sense of the common grounds, if not direct “results,” for engaging in contemporary struggles over redevelopment.

In the end, what seems like inaction in these last stand-offs may actually point to transformations in another key—less as event than nonevent, less as confrontation than passive activity. This is a drift in political sensibilities that can be sensed, if not legibly grasped, through such modalities as the shifting aesthetics of state engagement, the emerging propensities of a crumbling house, and the atmospherics of law as it condenses and spreads disaffection across the neighborhood and the courts. If “event,” as Marshall Sahlins once noted, “is the relation between a happening and a structure” (1985:xiv), such uneventful drift no doubt points to the relation between a happening and infrastructure. By following residents in thinking infrastructurally about redevelopment, this article ultimately argues for ethnographic attention to other kinds of agencies and unfoldings beyond those made legible in “hearings” or “incidents” in the political landscape. It calls for rethinking citizen–state struggles through attunements to the uneventful and the atmospheric, where hidden fractures or incipient alliances may be gathering energies on the margins of what we presume to be the stuff of “politics” or “law” (cf. Stewart 2011).

## Notes

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1. See Hess 2010 for discussion of popular media interest in last-standing houses. Examples of human rights coverage include reports by Human Rights Watch (2004) and by the Congressional-Executive Committee on China (2004).

2. For discussions of Chinese legal reform in relation to WTO entry, see Liang 2008 and Lam 2009. For a more detailed sketch of legal reform in housing disputes, see Cai 2007.

3. See news reports in Xinhua 2011a and 2011b. Also see Erie 2012:35–36, 51.

4. See Latour 1999 and Larkin 2008 and 2013 for general discussions of these features. On infrastructure as visible modern sign, see Mrázek 2002, and as technological sublime, see Gandy 2003:34–35. On visibility at breakdown, see Star 1999 and Graham 2010.

5. This is not to say that these articulations of form—as system, network, assemblage—are necessarily separate or opposed in scholarly descriptions of infrastructure. For instance, Erik Swynedouw variously refers to infrastructures as “networked technostuctures” (2006:105) and as “dynamic heterogeneous assemblages” (2006:108).

6. In pointing to the always partial nature of infrastructure, I am arguing against seeing infrastructure’s “form” as if it were some ontologically fixed thing in a hylomorphic model of social life (i.e., as if infrastructure existed as a predetermined moldlike “form” imposing itself on passive form-receiving “matter”). By exploring the ambiguities of disrepair, I focus instead on the operative capacities and processual effects of infrastructures as material ensembles-in-flux that share certain common pragmatic features if not a universal “form.” The emphasis here is on explicating the dynamics of a distinctive style of structuration (e.g., as distributive, other-regarding, embedding) as opposed to the fixed lines of “structure” per se.

7. It is important to note, however, that the idea of infrastructure as an easily embedded and naturalized “backdrop” has been critiqued for having relevance and normative force only among predominantly privileged communities in the global North (Edwards 2003; Larkin 2013). Where people face constant disruptions to public utilities and other distributional networks, infrastructures may not be so “invisible” in social life.

8. An example of media coverage of these details is the 2008 *Fujian Ribao* article “Three Lanes and Seven Alley’s Renovation: From History Towards the Future,” which was subsequently reprinted on the provincial government’s website.

9. An official report by Fuzhou’s Gulou District Housing Administration (2008) noted that only 177 of 3,723 households had yet to be relocated by October 2008. Also see Wang et al. 2007:6.

10. My point here resonates with recent ethnographic observations in Hull 2012.

11. This phrase is the subject of many online discussions and generates 177,000 hits, dating back to 2007, on the popular Chinese search engine Baidu.

12. Public notices in 2007 listed compensation as 2,998 RMB per square meter. One of Fuzhou’s largest online real estate companies, Fangke Net, estimates the current average real estate price in the neighborhood, for both old and new housing combined, to be 15,000–18,000 RMB per square meter (interview on March 19, 2013). However, current listings show prices as low as 13,000 RMB and as high as 40,000 RMB per square meter.

13. See Xinhua 2011a and 2011b for recent statements by the State Council and the Supreme Court on this point.

14. See Choy 2011 for a discussion of the airy and windy forces of Chinese sociality. On social heat, especially in the emic terms

of *renao* (heat and noise), see Weller 1994, Chau 2006, Hatfield 2009, and Steinmüller 2011. For an exploration of Chinese relationships in terms of the gathering and dispersal of social energies, see Stafford 2000. Farquhar 2002 also points to the problem of uneven circulation in Chinese understandings of both the body and the economy.

15. Here I am referring to the traditional Chinese polarity of yin and yang, which typically finds spatial expression in the contrast between the "hot" sites of human habitation (yang) and the "cold" landscapes of the dead (yin). A classic anthropological description of this distinction is given by Freedman 1968. Also see Ahern 1973 and, more recently, Knapp 2005.

16. Matthew Erie (2012) also notes how lawsuits can be deployed to court media attention and, in turn, set new "virtual precedents" for dispute resolution beyond formal legal settings. While such aspirations were in play in Fuzhou, I also found widespread disillusionment among evictees about media strategies. Far from providing a satisfying forum for "justice," the media was often seen as suffering from fickle interests and compassion fatigue because of the sheer glut of eviction-and-demolition cases now competing for publicity.

17. Interview with planning official on November 10, 2009.

18. See also Anand 2012 and Rodgers 2012.

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