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Editorial

Rural restructuring in China



A B S T R A C T

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This multidisciplinary special issue examines the contemporary rural restructuring in China, focusing on spatial restructuring, economic restructuring and social restructuring and the key challenges for rural areas, whether at local, regional, national or international level. The contributions to this special issue provide conceptual–theoretical and empirical takes on rural restructuring in China. However, the volatility and complexity of rural restructuring in China will present ongoing challenges for further research on the restructuring of rural China. In view of this, this themed edition makes a compelling call for more systematic research of rural restructuring based on extensive disciplinary interaction. This special issue is published to coincide with the 33rd International Geographical Congress (IGC) of IGU in Beijing.

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1. Introduction

Rural restructuring was defined by Woods (2009a) as “the reshaping of social and economic structures in rural areas during the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century produced by various, interconnected processes of change including the declining economic significance of agriculture, the rise of the service sector, urban to rural migration, and so on”. Actually, rural China has experienced a rapid and far-reaching reshaping of social and economic structures since the late twentieth century, especially the beginning of China’s economic reforms in 1978. As China evolves into a majority urban country, these processes present a number of challenges to the rural areas which have been confronted with significant changes and subsequent restructuring of rural socio-economic morphology and territorial spatial patterns, including changes in demographic structures, employment opportunities, community organization, lifestyles and standards of living, accessibility, rural culture as well as the restructuring of rural industries and rural production, living and ecological spaces (Woods, 2005; Long et al., 2012; Long, 2014; Long and Liu, 2015).

There are significant spatial variations in the experience and impact of economic and social restructuring in rural China (Li et al., 2015). Whilst rural income levels have improved in many regions, especially those close to large urban centers, urban–rural inequalities in income and uncoordinated urban–rural development have increased in more developed regions (Long et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2013). Furthermore, by the end of 2014, there were still 14 contiguous poverty-stricken areas, 592 national poverty counties, 128 thousand impoverished villages, 29.49 million poor families, and 70.17 million rural poor in China (Long et al., 2016a). Usually, most contiguous poverty-stricken areas lie in revolutionary base areas, minority areas, remote and border areas with bad physical conditions and weak socio-economic foundation, which

determines that the task of poverty reduction is arduous in these areas (Liu et al., 2016a; Long et al., 2016a). Recently, with the rapid advance of urbanization, the negative effects of urban–rural and inter-regional development gap are increasingly obvious and have attracted more attention (Long et al., 2016a). Yet rural restructuring in China continues to be strongly shaped by national macroeconomic development strategies, a critical analysis of which is needed so as to gain a new recognition of the centrality of rural restructuring to the development of the national economy (Long and Woods, 2011; Long et al., 2012; Long and Liu, 2015).

Meanwhile, rural China is increasingly integrated into global social and economic networks (Long and Woods, 2011; Woods, 2012). Increased political, economic and cultural openness has exposed rural localities in China to globalization processes – such as global trade and economic competition, international migration, and cultural assimilation – that are already contributing to the reconstitution of rural places elsewhere (Woods, 2007, 2012). As such, the problems associated with rural restructuring in China may in part be addressed by drawing on experiences and achievements from other countries, which may have experienced similar developmental stages as part of their trajectory of rural progression (Long and Woods, 2011; Long and Liu, 2015).

However, the relevant literature on rural restructuring in China is scarce and this exposes a number of theoretical, methodological and practical difficulties (Long, 2012; Liu et al., 2016b). In order to address this research gap, this special issue aims to advance our understanding of the contemporary rural restructuring in China, focusing on spatial restructuring, economic restructuring and social restructuring, and the key challenges for rural areas. The contributions in this special issue seek to offer novel multi-disciplinary contributions that provide important, original and creative solutions to the analysis, monitoring and measuring of rural restructuring in China, whether at local, regional, national or international level.

The next section provides a brief description of each of the twenty five papers included in this special issue.

2. Contents of the special issue

Aiming at the increasing trend emphasizing the role of regional resources in formulating rural development policy and restructuring rural areas, Long et al. analyze the rural restructuring in China affected by the allocation and management of critical resources including human resource, land resource and capital, by establishing a theoretical framework of “elements-structure-function” of rural territorial system. The paper by Long et al. argues that rural restructuring is a process of optimizing the allocation and management of the material and non-material elements affecting the development of rural areas and accomplishing the structure optimization and the function maximization of rural development system, and it is necessary to restructure the contours of state intervention in rural societies and economies and allocate and manage the critical resources affecting rural development, from the perspectives of integrating urban and rural resources, improving the efficiency of resources utilization, and fully understanding the influences of globalization on rural restructuring in China. The paper also addresses the problems and challenges for the future development of rural China, including de-agriculturalization, non-grain preference and the abandonment of farmland use together with the derelict and idle rural housing land, the weakening mainstream of rural development, the unfair urban–rural allocation of capital and its structural imbalance. Aiming at how to resolve the problems and adapt to the challenges, Long et al. point out that it is pivotal to restructure the rural development space, rural industry, and rural social organization and management mainstream, which form the three aspects of rural restructuring, i.e., spatial restructuring, economic restructuring and social restructuring. In general, the remaining twenty four papers included in this special issue may be individually set in relation to the abovementioned three aspects of rural restructuring.

2.1. Spatial restructuring

Due to the constraints from the maintained urban–rural dualism of land ownership and household registration as well as unstable rural development institution and mechanism and backward rural infrastructures (Long et al., 2010), the scattered distribution and hollowing of rural settlements, the fragmentation of farmland and the disordered arrangement of township and village enterprises in its early stage make the implementation of new-type urbanization and agricultural modernization strategies in China lack of a major hand grip and spatial supporting platform, which greatly affects the advancement of urban–rural integration development. On the one hand, production elements would be depleted in the flow process due to chaos production space and the cost of economic development would be increased. On the other hand, it is difficult to put the optimal allocation of rural public infrastructure and socialization services into implementation. Hence, it is necessary to restructure rural production, living and ecological spaces, so as to establish a new platform for building new countryside and realizing urban–rural integration development in China (Long, 2014). Rural spatial restructuring is an optimization and adjustment even utterly change process of rural production, living and ecological spaces accompanied by the reshaping of socio-economic structure in rural areas owing to an integrated result of endogenous development need and exogenous driving forces of rural development, under the pressure of rapid industrialization and urbanization, and it is also an integrated approach aiming at optimizing urban–rural space organization and promoting coordinated

urban–rural development (Long, 2014). Eight papers in this special issue address the spatial aspects of rural restructuring in China.

Using the methods of nearest neighbor distance analysis and geographical detector analysis, Yang et al. conclude the spatial distribution of rural settlements in China with significant regional differences, i.e., denser in the southeastern regions compared to the northwestern regions, high density and mainly random and disperse in plains, and low density and mainly clustered in regions such as cold alpine areas and desert fringes. The detected influential factors contributing to these spatial distributions include traditions and the economy, average distance to main roadway, agricultural machinery, per capita grain production, per capita arable land, population density, elevation, precipitation, etc. Accordingly, multiple distribution patterns are developed to restructure the rural spaces in different geographical areas, such as radially imbalanced distribution mode, multicore central land distribution mode, corridor balanced and imbalanced distribution mode, and radially balanced, central land distribution mode.

Liu et al. investigate the spatial patterns, temporal processes and driving mechanisms of urban–rural land use transformation based on the case study of Xuanhua district of Hebei province, and argue that industrialization and urbanization are the basic driving factors of urban–rural land use transformation, and local, regional and national socio-economic transformation deeply and widely affect its development. The paper by Liu et al. then highlights that the regional development should implement correct urban–rural transformation strategy and plan according to its location and nature resources conditions, and obey the spatial laws of urban–rural transformation for improving the efficiency of land use and promoting urban–rural integration.

Yao and Xie examine rural spatial restructuring in an ecologically fragile mountainous area of southern China at a village-township level based on a set of methods concerning landscape security pattern construction as well as a model of rural residential land expansion using an ant colony optimization algorithm and scenario simulation, which were proved to be a useful technical toolkit supporting rural spatial restructuring in the ecologically fragile mountainous areas of southern China. Yao and Xie argue that it is necessary to recognize and better explore the multiple functions of the countryside, and the government's scientific planning and appropriate control of self-renewal processes of rural space can make more economical use of land, and can guarantee the provision of public goods such as ecological welfare and food security.

Land consolidation is a spatial problem-solving land management instrument and is also regarded as an indispensable way of spatial restructuring in rural China (Long, 2014). It is worth mentioning that rural construction land consolidation locking up unused rural housing land in ‘hollowed villages’ accelerates the restructuring in rural China fueled by ‘increasing vs. decreasing balance’ land-use policy, which seeks to balance increases in urban construction land with a reduction in rural construction land (Long et al., 2012). It is an innovative approach to coordinating the outmigration of a rural population and the increase in rural housing land for China in the context of concerns over urban development and food security, thereby protecting farmland and ensuring food security, adding to urban construction land quotas, and improving the rural habitat environment in China. In the remaining parts of this rural restructuring type we provide brief details on each of the five articles concerning rural spatial restructuring via land consolidation.

Liu et al. investigate the drivers of land coverage under the program of community-based agricultural land consolidation aiming at restructuring the agricultural sector by pooling fragmented land and leasing it as consolidated plots or employing labors to

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