



The allocation and management of critical resources in rural China under restructuring: Problems and prospects



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 October 2015

Received in revised form

11 March 2016

Accepted 18 March 2016

Available online 30 March 2016

Keywords:

Spatial restructuring

Industrial reshaping

Social restructuring

State intervention

Industrial and commercial capital

Urban–rural development

Globalization

ABSTRACT

Rapid and far-reaching development transition has triggered corresponding restructuring in rural China especially since the turn of the new millennium. Recently, there has been an increasing trend emphasizing regional resources in formulating rural development policy and restructuring rural areas. This paper analyzes 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. It is argued 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 maximum of rural development system. Due to the constraints from the maintained urban–rural dualism of land ownership and household registration, the rapid rural restructuring under both globalization and the implementation of the national strategies on industrialization, urbanization, informatization and agricultural modernization, the changes of the allocation of critical resources have brought about many problems and challenges for the future development of rural China, such as the nonagriculturalization, non-grain preference and abandonment of farmland use together with the derelict and idle rural housing land, the weakening mainbody of rural development, the unfair urban–rural allocation of capital and its structural imbalance, and so on. Aiming at how to resolve the problems and adapt to the challenges, it is pivotal to restructure the rural development space, rural industry, and rural social organization and management mainbody. Furthermore, 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.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, rural restructuring has been a hot topic of rural studies (Wilson, 1995; Kiss, 2000; Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001; Xu and Tan, 2002; Tonts and Atherley, 2005; Woods, 2005; Long and Woods, 2011; Fang and Liu, 2015). Rural restructuring is more or less interlinked with rural decline, an inevitable process associated with globalization and urbanization (Markey et al., 2008; Woods, 2013a). Most developed countries including United States, Canada, Japan, South Korea, and some European countries have

experienced this kind of decline as well as rapid rural restructuring (McDonald, 1996; Abafita et al., 2013; Mulgan, 1997; Falk et al., 2003; Woods, 2013a). The experiences of rural restructuring in developed countries show that challenges and subsequent improvements coexisted during the process.

On the one hand, this restructuring process has brought about a series of challenges. For instance, the uneven impact of regional migration and restructuring of employment is transforming rural regions in Europe in different ways, and is bringing about challenges facing rural regions with regard to social services provision (Manthorpe and Livsey, 2009). The territorial restructuring occurs at multiple scales to facilitate the investment in and sale and export of natural resource commodities, and the construction of rural communities usually blends the restructuring of places and spaces

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and the resistance from peasants' struggle for land reform to their indigenous alliance in defense of territory (Brent, 2015). In some European countries, the agricultural and rural capital markets are also facing specific credit constraints related to agricultural assets and rural fixed asset specificities (Bojnec, 2012). The European experiences showed that land consolidation as an isolated tool for rural restructuring in transitional environments may trigger some unfavorable side-effects (Djanibekov et al., 2012).

On the other hand, some endearing improvements have been achieved. For example, in developed countries, consumption turns to be the driving force behind growth and change in many 'post-productivist' rural areas, and landscapes are actively produced to capitalize upon local amenities (van Auken and Rye, 2011). Currently, rural restructuring in the European countryside is shifting from an agricultural and manufacturing-based economy towards a service-centred economy in which the countryside is considered to be a place of consumption instead of a place of production (Rogge et al., 2013). Rural economic restructuring and the expansion of low-density exurban areas and growth of amenity-based rural areas have led to a new form of urban-rural space, which is characterized by the merging of a rural landscape form with urban economic function (Irwin et al., 2009). The process of agricultural restructuring in Europe was characterized by agricultural multifunctionality and entrepreneurial farmers (Morgan et al., 2010). The achievements of South Korea's new countryside movement and Japan's "one village one trademark" revolution have provided useful references for China's rural restructuring (Xie, 2006, 2007; Zhang et al., 2007).

In China, a typical developing country, rapid and far-reaching development transition has triggered corresponding rural restructuring especially since the turn of the new millennium (Long et al., 2011; Long and Liu, 2015). With the influences of globalization and the implementation of the national strategies on industrialization, urbanization, informatization and agricultural modernization (Li et al., 2014b), vast rural China has been profoundly changed due to the recombination of regional development factors and the reshaping of regional industries (Long et al., 2009). It has taken on the status quo of nonagriculturalization and concurrent occupation of rural population, nonagriculturalization and non-grain preference of rural land use, and nonagriculturalization and diversification of rural industry (Long, 2014). Furthermore, it has brought about some problems in some parts of the rural areas, e.g., the flow away of young laborers, the weakening of rural development mainbody, the abandoning of rural land, the hollowing of villages, the shortage of public infrastructure, the desalinizing of consanguineous relation as well as the disappearing of cultural memory symbols. Meanwhile, driven by the changes of rural internal factors and the demands of external system, the reallocation of rural production elements has brought about unprecedented opportunities for rural development. Aiming at the challenges and opportunities during the period of social transformation, the central government has clearly put forward a series of strategic guiding policies concerning realizing rural restructuring and promoting rural development since 2004, e.g., "Building New Countryside" (Long et al., 2010) and "Implementing New-Type Urbanization".¹

Rural restructuring in China might mainly be described in three aspects, i.e., spatial restructuring, industrial reshaping and administrative reorganization (Long et al., 2012). China has undergone rapid economic growth and dramatic industrial restructuring, with

the proportion of the primary, secondary and tertiary industry changed from 15%, 46% and 39% of GDP in 2000 to 10%, 44% and 46% in 2013, respectively (NBSC, 2014a). Research shows that the influential factors of China's industrial structure include domestic consumption propensity, urban-rural disparity, scale of the labor force and capital stock, property right protection, and administrative effectiveness (Dong et al., 2011). However, western scholars argued that human relations affecting different forms of embeddedness, a local or regional phenomenon that generally promotes the restructuring of rural areas, play an important role in industrial restructuring in rural areas (Fløysand and Sjøholt, 2007).

There have been diverse researches concerning spatial restructuring in rural China, e.g., the ways, strategies and its relationship with urban-rural development (Long, 2014; Chen and Zhang, 2009; Liu et al., 2011; Xiao and Ou, 2013; Fang and Liu, 2014). Rural settlements concentration and school mapping restructure are the important forms of this kind of spatial restructuring (Tan and Li, 2013; Zhao and Parolin, 2012, 2014). As for administrative reorganization, the consolidation of villages into a rural community and merging townships into a town logically lead to an amalgamation of administrative units (Long et al., 2012; Lai, 1997; Wang, 2010). Aiming at the effects of rapid urbanization on rural transformation development, a new hierarchical relationship and its administrative system concerning villages and towns in China were suggested (Liu, 2014). Since reconfiguring local government is a quintessential rural development initiative (Douglas, 2005), Gu et al. (2015) advocated the designation of a new type of city in China.

As shown by the practices of rural restructuring of both developed and developing countries, there has been an increasing trend emphasizing regional resources in formulating rural development policy and restructuring rural areas (Zasada et al., 2015). Among the resources affecting rural restructuring, the authors argue that human resource, land resource and capital are critical. Migration plays an increasing role in China's economy by affecting economic restructuring, and results in a series of socio-economic changes including rural restructuring, balanced regional development, and laborer market changes (Li et al., 2014a; Liu et al., 2014). The allocation policy on local resource use such as land and forest directly affected rural household livelihoods in Lao People's Democratic Republic (Fujita and Phanvilay, 2008). Territorial capital investment has been considered as one of main cornerstones for rural development (OECD, 2006). Tolbert et al. (2014) examined the changes in local ownership of traditional financial services and found that the rate of decline had been greatest in most rural counties.

There are abundant researches dealing with resources allocation and rural restructuring in China. For example, Rogers (2014) depicted the inequality pattern of resource allocation in rural restructuring of China's poverty counties, due to local government's betting on the strong, that is it concentrates resources in villages with better existing conditions instead of poorer villages who are in greater need. Cui (2008) argued that the transformation of Chinese economic development relies on the building of a support system based on adjusting and optimizing the supply-and-demand structure of resources. Du (2012) advocated that the optimal allocation of rural human resource help to realize the sustainable development of agriculture and rural economy; however, the situation of the quality of rural human resource in China is not optimistic. The research of Song (2015) showed that the state-collective divide and the urban-rural dichotomy in property rights were restructured in current land development in China, and villagers were able to use various means to take advantage of transitional and favorable deals to gain expected returns. There was distinct regional difference in the allocation of financial resource of rural social security in China (Ye and Qiu, 2015). In the last three decades, administrative factor instead of market factor played a decisive role

¹ The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council of China. National Plan on New-type Urbanization (2014–2020) (http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-03/16/content_2640075.htm).

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