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Small town urbanization in Western China: Villager resettlement and integration in Xi'an

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates land-related resettlement and integration institutions and policies in small town urbanization from the perspective of affected villagers, focusing on their socioeconomic opportunities and life transformation. Based on the conceptual discourse on rural-urban societal differences, institutional boundaries, and resource redistribution, it examines the process and outcomes of rural villagers' transformation under land-related local policies and the market, and articulates affected villagers' viewpoints regarding compensation, resettlement, and integration. By the case of three small towns in metropolitan Xi'an, the paper discusses educational attainments and occupations, household earnings, income compositions, home-workplace commuting patterns and modes, social security programs, and attitudes towards land acquisition and resettlement. The study calls for villager-centered hybrid governance for humanistic planning and management of resettlement communities in small town urbanization.

1. Introduction

The resettlement and integration of rural population into small towns deserves attention given China's recent ambitious plan to direct rural villagers to small towns and medium-sized cities to lessen the pressure on increasingly overcrowded large cities around which growth has long been centered in a context of accelerating urbanization. The critical role of small towns in the regional context has been affirmed by the 2008 National Urban and Rural Planning Act, which revised the traditional city-centered planning strategies and extended to include small towns and rural areas in the formal master planning mechanism, emphasizing the concept of city region as a spatial context for planning. It is widely acknowledged that confronted with both visible and invisible barriers such as institutional and market exclusion, social isolation, and residential segregation, newly urbanized villagers have often struggled in navigating their life in new environment (*e.g.* Chan, 1994; Dong et al., 2011; Fan, 2008; Liu, 2010). Yet, rural villagers' expectations and the realities they encounter in small town urbanization have been understudied. Rich existing studies that generalize their findings based on a one-group approach such as migrant workers (*mingong*) or diasporic migrants (*liudong renkou*) in large Chinese cities likely overlook potential differences and contradictions among different groups of villagers who settle in towns and cities. While resettled villagers in small town urbanization indeed share some common characteristics and challenges with diasporic migrants and resettled villagers in large cities, any all-inclusive, broad-brush approach to resettled villagers shows insufficient probing of the great diversity of resettled villager cohorts and their communities in China's urbanization. The complicated process of villagers' resettlement and integration into small town society is determined by not only social and economic conditions in former villages and host small towns, but also contingencies that arise during resettlement and integration under the joint forces of individual household characteristics, rural village community culture, institutional factors, and market conditions. Villagers' successful transformation and adaptation to small town living would decrease the possibility of social unrest, help resettled villagers to develop their long-term plans, and ultimately benefit sustainable small town growth.

Since 1999, China's Western Development Strategy has combined government policies with market mechanism and become a launch pad for industrialization and urbanization in the country's western regions, where the pace and magnitude of development is less intense than that of their eastern counterparts. Different from urbanization in the eastern coastal regions where large-scale diasporic migrant influx has been phenomenal, urbanization in Western China witnesses more migration within the western regions. The implementation of the Strategy has attracted increasingly extensive research on urbanization in China's western cities (*e.g.* Huang et al., 2017; Liu and Ravenscroft, 2017; Wu

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et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2017; Zhen et al., 2014). However, little emphasis has been placed on analyzing small town urbanization in China's western regions. There is a lack of understanding about how the rural population, after losing their agricultural land to urbanization, has negotiated the urban-rural difference while adapting to or resisting against government-instigated small town urbanization in the western regions. Hence, it is necessary to investigate how the socioeconomic circumstance and lifestyle of the peasantry in China's western regions have been affected by small town urbanization.

This paper investigates the physical, social, and economic transformation of rural villagers in small town urbanization. It aims to examine the process and outcomes of rural villagers' transformation under land-related local policies and the market, and articulate rural villagers' viewpoints on compensation, resettlement, and adaptation in their transition to small town citizens. The study is an exploratory attempt to address several research questions from the perspective of affected villagers. It elucidates how land-related physical changes in small town urbanization bring about social, economic, lifestyle and behavioral transformation of affected villagers who strive to adapt to small town society. How the compensation and resettlement institutions and policies, either as supports or barriers, have contributed to these rural peasants' socioeconomic transformation warrants systematic investigation. The extent to which institutional efforts succeed in changing the socioeconomic opportunities and lives of the peasantry, dismantling and/or reorganizing the village communities, and eventually transforming the village population into small town citizens needs to be scrutinized. Affected villagers' reflections and opinions are critical in assessing small town urbanization because the relationships of an individual to her group, and of different groups to each other and the state, and their collective impact on land are considered key factors in any system of land tenure and property rights (Payne, 1997). This study examines *in situ* small town urbanization of rural areas abutting built-up small towns. Such passive urbanization does not involve far-flung villager relocation, and can be interpreted as an expansion or infiltration of small town socioeconomic activities into the neighboring countryside.

2. Conceptual discourse on small town urbanization: societal differences, institutional boundaries, and resource redistribution

Scholars in the West distinguish urban society from rural community by maintaining that moving into an urban society, individuals from rural communities have to become more dependent on formal organizational resources for sustenance while their original and primary relationships from village life are weakened. Urban citizens are limited members of various social networks to which they are bounded in multiple ways (Wellman, 1979; Wellman and Leighton, 1979; White and Guest, 2003). Others posit that industrialization and urbanization have not completely superseded communal contacts and neighborliness, which survive as important sources of mutual support and sociability (Sampson, 1999; Schiefloe, 1990). These conceptual standpoints are not mutually exclusive. For the newly urbanized, urban living requires them to be integrated into multiple social networks and become dependent on formal resources while still maintaining intense social interactions carried over from their original rural communities. However, even though studies demonstrate that developing relationships with their host society can alleviate new urbanites' feelings of helplessness and improve their life and employment satisfaction (Ullman and Tatar, 2001), traditional social networks may only be partially reconstructed in the host society (McMichael and Manderson, 2004).

The urban-rural societal differences can be ascribed to institutional settings. There is an institutional change from a society of informality to one of formality in urbanization. Institutions include both formal rules such as regulations, laws, and acts, and informal ones such as conventions, moral rules, and social norms (Eggertsson, 1994; North, 1990). Informal institutions are often unwritten and implicit. In a traditional rural community, informal institutions typically play a critical role in collective actions and interactions among rural individuals. But in an urban society, citizens' socioeconomic activities are more dependent on formal institutions, in which their social and economic conducts are bounded by formal codes and rules to guide their behaviors and interactions.

In addition to engendering societal differences, institutions also help to establish boundaries in favor of the privileged. Tilly (1998, 2002, 2005) posits two kinds of boundaries that define different categories. The first kind of boundary maintains inequality by protecting privileged access to a resource and opportunities that stem from that resource. To achieve this objective, formal institutions are established and maintained by the privileged. The second kind of boundary is used for contesting inequality by resisting against the monopoly over a resource by the privileged. Two major hindrances to institutional boundary change are the cost of obtaining correct and sufficient information about institutional arrangement and the cost of persuading or forcing the privileged groups to acquiesce (Cheung, 1982). The boundaries can deny a person accesses and resources, and keep her in an inferior position in resource (re)distribution, which involves both the collection of resources and their (re)distribution in a delimited territory. Social exclusion of certain people and its spatial concentration give rise to the lack of their stable integration in the labor market and problematic participation in the redistribution of social welfare, housing, employment, education and health (Mingione, 1996). In response to the resource (re)distribution defined by the boundaries of inequality, the marginalized typically develop strategies to contest the unfair treatments resulted from their inferior positions. McDowell (2002) proposes a resource-strategy-outcome framework and maintains that poverty risks and socioeconomic wellbeing are the combined results of 1) the structure, including the external living environment as well as the institutions and policies that provide or restrict socioeconomic opportunities; 2) the physical, social, economic assets and capitals for livelihood reconstruction and adaptation; and 3) the livelihood strategies of affected individuals and households. Practically, Cernea's (1997) model of risks in dislocation includes landlessness, joblessness, marginalization, loss of access to common property resources, and community disarticulation.

China's large-scale and widespread urbanization through 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2004; Sparke, 2008) leads to unprecedented rural land dispossession and resettlement of villagers in towns and cities. Rural and urban communities are inherently different in China. The differences are consolidated by the fact that rural villages are typically stable, enclosed, homogeneous communities where there are prevalent and dense social networks and intense interactions among village members (Fei, 1992; Oi, 1999). Once urbanized, these villagers have to become open and interactive with more formally organized urban systems and resources. Rural spatial proximity and integration centered on a same village quickly fade away in urban setting. The change in life from a rural community to an urban society has never been easy also because the institutional categorization of rural and urban registered residents has shaped two different groups of residents and the shift of status between the two has fundamental implications. This long existing urban-rural divide has penetrated into formal institutions of education, employment, health care, public housing, social welfare, and other public redistribution systems (Chan, 2009; Wang, 2005). Therefore, villagers' transformation and adaptation to small town life encounters a wide range of institutional boundaries that can hardly be overcome by any single-vision institutional reforms such as the recent changes in the household registration (*hukou*) system.

Whether the host society and its members accept newly urbanized villagers as *bona fide* members determines how well and how soon resettled villagers adapt to their new life. It is still controversial whether strong connection to the host society and close ties to high-status people would accelerate affected villagers' socioeconomic adaptation to the host society. Some argue that villagers' social networks carried over