



Land consolidation for rural sustainability in China: Practical reflections and policy implications

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ABSTRACT

The dual land system restricts the sustainable development of rural China which undergoes rapid depopulation and abandoned and inefficiently used land. The viewpoint paper reviews the typical rural land system and reflects the land consolidation project in a village community of Shandong Province. It indicates that land consolidation is needed to coordinate and improve the changing human-land relationship in rural China. Certain policy terms and stipulations could be set to encourage the transfer of peasant's land operation right and promote scale land operation. And, an expanded rural land market is needed to enhance the value of peasants' residential land to reverse village hollowing problem. Finally, the paper highlights that rural land consolidation is a systematic project and should be implemented by respecting local stakeholders' willingness and request.

1. Introduction

Land consolidation is a spatial problem-solving technique that attempts to eliminate certain types of land fragmentation through a process of concentration of plots (Coelho et al., 1996). Land consolidation is praised by many planners who believe that it promotes land markets and rural development, and thus helps to combat rural depopulation by improving farm productivity through easier mechanization and reduced transport costs (Miranda et al., 2006). According to Pasakarnis and Maliene (2010), the role of land consolidation has extended from mainly focusing on improving agricultural production at the very beginning to the improvement of agricultural production conditions, employments, infrastructure and public facilities etc. as part of regional development program for villages.

Rural China has been undergoing rapidly changing human-land relationship in the recent decades (Li et al., 2014, 2015). For one thing, we saw large amount of peasants rushing into cities for higher paid jobs, for another thing, we noticed quite many unused or abandoned houses, inefficiently used or abandoned farmland in their home villages. In 1998, the Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Center of the Ministry of Land and Resources of China was established and it plays an important role in making the national land consolidation plan, directing local land consolidation projects, participating in land legislation and technical regulation etc. The Law of Land Administration of the People's Republic of China wrote clearly in 1999, the regulations of implementing land consolidation in rural areas. For one thing, same

amount of farmland must be reclaimed once non-agricultural construction occupies certain farmland, for another thing, the state encourages consolidation of mid-low yield lands, abandoned land and idle land. The county and town governments lead the role in carrying out comprehensive consolidation of fields, water, roads, forests and villages to improve farmland quality and agricultural production conditions. In China's 10th, 11th and 12th Five-Year Plans (2001–2005, 2006–2010, 2011–2015), there are items that emphasize the importance of accelerating rural land consolidation. As a result, land consolidation has been praised and promoted to improve and coordinate the human-land relationship in rural China (Huang et al., 2011; Long et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2013; Li et al., 2016). The widely implemented land consolidation projects are aimed to reverse land fragmentation and increase the quantity of farmland and to improve the production, living and ecological conditions by comprehensively consolidating the fields, water, roads, forests and villages.

Generally, rural China has gained much progress by way of land consolidation, which however, has also encountered many challenges due to China's dual land system. The deficiency and reform options of China's land use system were discussed and argued by many scholars (Liu and Yang, 1990; Chan, 1999; Ding, 2003; Guo, 2004). The governments are also called to reevaluate their land use policies, and respond to the needs of the people as human-land relationship changes in the countryside. Thus, the paper aims to investigate the challenges in implementing land consolidation in rural China and to pose policy implications for rural sustainability.

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2. Research base

2.1. Rural land consolidation in the world

Globally, land consolidation has long been carried out to deal with the land fragmentation, especially in the Scandinavia countries in the 18th and 19th centuries (Bullard, 2007). Denmark for instance, implemented land consolidation with the beginning of land reforms in the 1780s when the common use of agricultural land was supplanted by forms of private ownership and a private family farms were established (Hartvigsen, 2005).

Ever since the end of World War II, modern land consolidation practices in Western Europe have been developed when the notion of equality between the rural and urban standards of living evolved all over the Europe. The concept of urban-rural equalized development was coined and implemented in Germany in 1950. It refers to the equivalent standard of living between urban inhabitants and rural inhabitants who may have different life styles, and emphasizes that living in rural areas doesn't indicate reduced life quality (Neander and Schrader, 2000). Then, programs such as land consolidation and rural renovation were carried out in rural Germany, facilitating a shift from traditional agricultural to multi-functional and integrated development, which focuses on environment, landscapes and cultural preservation and enhancing people's livelihood (Magel, 2007). Rural land consolidation in Bavaria, Germany since the 1960s has proved its important role in sustaining villages through the process of farmland standardization, industrialized agriculture and socialized services, and entitled villagers with the same right and opportunities on education, employment, social security and other fields as urban citizens.

According to Zimmermann (1995), land consolidation has been considered as an efficient tool to support the implementation of a modern national land policy, and it has shown effectiveness in specific situations in creating better conditions of life in rural and urban areas and improving the sustainable use of resources and public facilities. Today land consolidation acts as an effective instrument in rural development, which includes improvements to agricultural production, employment, taxation policy, infrastructure, public facilities, housing and the protection of natural resources (Maliene et al., 2005).

In short, land consolidation has evolved from a narrow sense (simple land consolidation) to land consolidation in a broader sense (comprehensive land consolidation or complex land consolidation). The success of land consolidation lies in its role like an operation in coordinating human-land relationship of the countryside by consolidating the production, living and ecological conditions.

2.2. Typical rural land system in China

Basically, the human-land relationship of rural China has been distorted due to the dual land system. In China, each rural household was allocated a certain amount of land (0.25–0.55 hectares), according to the household responsibility system which was established in the early 1980s, and the households are responsible for both the profits and loss of their own plots. This has triggered peasants' enthusiasm in grain production after abolishing the collective farming system, but also induced severe land fragmentation, and the small plots of land make it hard for competitive commercial agriculture in China (Li, 2013). As the income from operating farmland loses its share in the household's annual income, we see large amount of peasant workers – most young and fit – left their home villages and towns for cities for higher paid jobs in the recent decade. This number reached 168.84 million in 2015,¹ and has then exacerbated villagers' insufficient care and input to the farmland.

Unlike the state-owned land in cities, rural land is collectively

owned by the village committee which delivers the contract. Peasants take the contract and obtain the land operation right while paying the tax and rent to the state.² This rural land system only provides peasants with equally distributed land use right, and prohibits them from selling and converting their land for non-agricultural use (Guo, 2004). What peasants can do is to transfer their land use right to other peasants or agricultural enterprises. This actually limits consolidating large scale land since the transferee has to negotiate the rent and commitment time with every household in a certain area. Besides, since the current rural land use policy doesn't give clear explanations on the rights and obligations of the subcontractors and contractors, default cases which highly impair the benefits of peasants or the transferee frequently take place though there is the so-called land leasing contract.

The residential land in rural China was given for free, by the village committee to each household whose head was born and registered in the village. Just like the contract land, the residential land is not allowed to be sold and purchased in the market either, which is only open to the state-owned land in cities. And, land requisition by the government becomes the only way, according to China's land use policy, to change the collective-owned land into state-owned land which can then be tradable in the real market. However, what peasants can get from land requisition is only the compensation for losing their land, nevertheless, such compensation is rather fewer than what the government obtain from selling the requisitioned land for commercial and residential use. As a result, peasants who have migrated to cities normally leave their houses unused or even abandoned (Fig. 1).

Rural China has in the recent decades, experienced the abandonment of a large number of residential properties, spreading throughout the settlement in villages which mostly are experiencing depopulation and economic recession. "Rural hollowing" was then coined to describe this phenomenon of "unused and abandoned rural residential land in the inner villages" of China (Liu et al., 2014). The policy of "increasing vs. decreasing balance of urban-rural built land" was introduced in China in 2006 to consolidate hollowing villages. This policy aims to achieve an equilibrium in construction land supply by balancing increases in urban construction land with decreases in rural construction land (be reclaimed to arable land).

3. Comprehensive rural land consolidation in Yucheng

3.1. The consolidation process

The Yangqiao community which is still under construction is located in Yucheng city, north Shandong Province, China. Owing to the rapid depopulation and severe hollowing problems, the local government decided to build the Yangqiao community by merging 11 neighboring villages. This project was initiated after consulting peasants' willingness and request. Built in the 1970s or 1980s, most houses in this place are adobe houses which become shabby and unsafe for habitation (Fig. 2). Driven by the dream of urban life, the rural youngsters want to live in apartments in cities for future life. However, the high cost has forced the youngsters and their family to give up their first preference. Then, the decision of building a new rural community of apartments and public facilities the same as that in cities, but of low cost, becomes popular among the villagers. The population of Yangqiao community is estimated to reach 5000 after merging surrounding villages. Supported by the National Science and Technology Support Program, our research team has been fully involved in the project and investigate key technologies of hollowing villages consolidation.³

An evaluation group was formed involving village cadres and officials from different governmental departments to fairly assess each house and the estimated value will be deducted from the cost of

¹ <http://money.163.com/16/0229/11/BH06M8S800253B0H.html>.

² China completely abolished the agricultural tax since 1 Jan. 2016.

³ <http://www.rard.org/post?postId=1026>.

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