



Land conversion and urban settlement intentions of the rural population in China: A case study of suburban Nanjing



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ABSTRACT

Rapid urban expansion in China has created a large population of landless farmers. Because these landless farmers are under-compensated for land acquisition and discriminated against by urban institutions, many of them face tremendous difficulties in their urban lives. Consequently, rural citizens generally resist land acquisition and conversion to urban residency. However, given the recent improvements in land compensation standards, the educational qualifications of the rural population and urban employment opportunities, the situation is likely to change. Based on a 2014 survey conducted in Nanjing's suburban Jiangning District, this paper examines the land conversion and settlement intentions of rural citizens under the new circumstances. Both in-depth interviews with local villagers and regression models suggest that relinquishing farmland and housing land and settling in the city are distinct decisions determined by dissimilar factors. The findings suggest that a compensation scheme that integrates rural land requisition and resettlement allocation barely meets the requirements of the affected villagers, which explains the observed resistance of rural citizens to land conversion and urban settlement.

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1. Introduction

Rapid urban expansion in China has converted excessive rural land into urban use, creating a huge pool of landless farmers. Deprived of the means of livelihood in the countryside, the landless farmers are forced to resort to urban jobs. Because compensation standards for rural land are generally low and urban social and economic barriers faced by rural migrants are high, most migrants find themselves in a disadvantaged situation in urban society. The increasing numbers of landless farmers have aggravated problems, such as unemployment, urban poverty and social inequality, which severely hinder China from sustainable development and achieving a 'harmonious society'. These concerns have led to the recent national campaign for a 'people-centred' urbanization introduced by the central government (SCC, 2014).

Meanwhile, food security and farmland preservation have been placed high on the policy agenda, leading to rigid control over arable land. In 2012, the 18th National Congress of the Communist

Party of China (2012) highlighted three guidelines regarding land use—'development', 'red lines' and 'rights protection', which aim to enable a more sustainable mode of development that balances land development, the preservation of adequate arable land and the protection of farmers' rights to rural land. In this new context, policies that promote excessive land conversion are reviewed, and compensation rates for rural land are raised substantially (Hui, Bao, & Zhang, 2013). Especially in more affluent regions, generous compensation schemes for rural land are introduced to encourage farmers to relinquish their rural land to accommodate urban expansion (Xu, Ma and Chen, 2011).

In the more industrialized and urbanized coastal China, rural residents usually earn a large proportion of their income from non-agricultural activities and properties (Hao, Sliuzas & Geertman, 2011; Long, Zou, & Liu, 2009). For those part-time farmers, rural landholdings function more as assets than a means of livelihood. In particular, farmers of the younger generation are more inclined towards non-agricultural jobs and an urban lifestyle compared to their older counterparts (Yue, Li, Feldman, & Du, 2010). Different stages in the life cycle also affect the way rural citizens value their rural land and consider settling in the city. Existing research has emphasized the migration and urban settlement decisions of rural

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citizens. However, existing studies that explore the intentions of rural residents with regard to both land conversion and urban settlement, especially in the new context, are limited. Although the current institution treats the rural-to-urban conversion of the rural population (*nong zhuan fei*) with an integrated scheme that requisitions rural land and converts residency status, the process involves a variety of decisions including farmland expropriation, housing land requisition or relocation and the conversion of residency, all faced by affected rural citizens. Due to the specific circumstances associated with individual households, the decisions are considered separately according to factors such as land availability and individual requirements and preferences. The decisions consequently deserve separate examination.

Based on a recent survey in the suburban Jiangning District in Nanjing, this paper explores the factors that drive the intentions of rural citizens with regard to both land conversion and urban settlement. We examine the intention to relinquish rural land and change residency instead of migrating because the former leads to permanent migration to and settling in the city by rural citizens and to potential changes in rural land use and ownership. Both processes have tremendous implications for China's ongoing urbanization. Moreover, the empirical analysis focuses on a region that has been undergoing rapid urbanization and development. The findings can yield important implications for designing responsive policies to facilitate dramatic urban transformations of both rural communities and land in places where urban expansion is the most rapid and pervasive.

After this introduction, section two reviews land conversion and settlement intentions in China. Section three describes the study area and data. Section four reports the results of the empirical analysis. Section five concludes with the main findings and policy implications.

2. Land conversion and urban settlement

In China, collective ownership over rural land is tied to the rural residency of farmer households. When a household's place of residency changes from rural to urban, their rights to rural land are surrendered simultaneously. Consequently, land conversion is a prerequisite for permanent urban residency and significantly influences the process of urbanization. Decisions regarding land conversion and urban settlement resemble rural–urban migration in other contexts. However, they are also subject to China's distinctive land institution and household registration system.

Existing research has explained human migration in various manners. At the macro-level, regional development disparity is usually considered a major reason for migration. At the micro-level, neo-classical theory regards migrants as rational individuals who make migration decisions based on a trade-off between costs and benefits (De Haas, 2010), whereas the new economics of labour migration considers migration a household decision rather than an individual choice (Stark, 1991). For rural–urban migration, attributes of both the rural origin and the urban destination are at play (Nelson, 1976). The rural-side benefits include landholdings, agricultural employment and the quality of rural life, whereas the urban-side benefits include employment opportunities in the city, wage levels, urban lifestyle, social environment and security concerns. Oftentimes the decision to migrate is determined by a lower economic development level in the origin and better employment opportunities, a higher salary and better quality of life in the destination (Khoo, Hugo, & McDonald, 2008).

In China, approximately 270 million rural migrants currently work in non-agricultural sectors, and the majority of them live in urban areas (NBS, 2015). Although they are considered members of the 'floating population', a large proportion of them will eventually

settle in urban areas and become genuine urbanites. This prospect has aroused scholarly attention on issues including 'permanent migration' and 'urban settlement' (e.g., Hao & Tang, 2015; Li & Siu, 1997; Sun & Fan, 2011; Tang & Feng, 2012, 2015; Yang, 2000; Zhu, 2007; Zhu & Chen, 2010). For rural migrants to make a decision on permanent migration or urban settlement, institutional constraints associated with China's *hukou* system¹ are a key determinant (Li & Siu, 1997). Because social welfare is provided only in the place of *hukou* registration, rural migrants without a local urban *hukou* are excluded from urban welfare and face various forms of institutional discrimination in the city (e.g., Liu, He, & Wu, 2008; Solinger, 1999; Zhang & Wang, 2010). The lack of a local urban *hukou* thus strongly discourages rural migrants to permanently migrate to and settle in the city (e.g., Hu, Xu, & Chen, 2011; Sun & Fan, 2011; Zhu & Chen, 2010).

In reality, however, few rural migrants are willing to convert their *hukou* from rural to urban because an urban *hukou* can only be obtained at the expense of surrendering rural landholdings (Hao & Tang, 2015; Zhu, 2007). For one thing, farmers are often under-compensated for rural land, leading to their resistance to land requisition. For another, after relinquishing rural land, farmers lose their rural income and countryside homes, putting themselves in an extremely vulnerable situation. In addition, their lack of professional education and training opportunities hamper them from obtaining more sophisticated professional jobs and social security benefits associated with such jobs. These factors present major hindrances for rural people to completely surrender their properties and benefits in the countryside and permanently settle in the city (He, Liu, Webster & Wu, 2009). Instead, most rural migrants prefer to work and live in the city while retaining their rural *hukou* and the associated rights to rural land (Roberts, 2002).

More recently, new guidelines introduced by the Communist Party of China (CCCPC, 2012) requires local governments to ensure higher compensation for rural land. This is especially the case in the more affluent regions in the eastern and southern coastal provinces, where lands are more valuable and local governments are more resourceful. Additionally, because these regions are more industrialized, local farmers usually obtain a larger proportion of their income from non-agricultural sectors and thus are less dependent on rural land. These new circumstances are likely to result in different decisions in land conversion and permanent migration for farmers in comparison with their previous situations or in comparison with their counterparts in less affluent regions.

According to China's 1986 Land Administration Law (LAL) and its amendment in 1998, a compensation scheme typically includes compensation for acquired land, resettlement of displaced farmers, and compensation for destroyed properties, including buildings and crops (Lin & Ho, 2005). In 1998, the ceiling of total compensation was raised to thirty times the average annual agricultural revenue generated from the acquired land in three consecutive years prior to the acquisition (CPC, 1998). However, in the face of the boom of the property market beginning in the late 1990s, the sluggish improvements in compensation standards have boosted the opportunity costs of land conversion, leading to strong resistance to land acquisition and frequent conflicts over rural land (Ding, 2007; Tian & Ma, 2009). In 2013, the upper limit of total compensation was removed, and new national guidelines have urged local authorities to introduce more generous compensation schemes, such as provisions for subsidized housing, social insurance and job training programmes (e.g., Xu, Ma, et al., 2011).

Recent studies have placed much attention on the plight of

¹ The *hukou* system is the household registration system of China, which strictly distinguishes urban citizens from rural citizens (see Chan, 2009).

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