



Resettlement and adaptation in China's small town urbanization: Evidence from the villagers' perspective



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ABSTRACT

Small town urbanization in China is a heterogeneous and contested process that involves numerous actors and forces in the context of highly liberalized local economies. This paper examines the socio-economic transformation and adaptation to small town life among landless and resettled villagers in the state-sponsored small town urbanization from the villagers' perspective. Based on survey opinions from the affected villagers in two small towns in Nanjing, it articulates how the institutional arrangements of land development and spatial-territorial reorganization have exerted their direct socioeconomic influence on the transformation of landless and displaced villagers' lives. The study concludes that, as a result of the growing establishment of socioeconomic relationships with the host small town society, villagers encounter various challenges that differ substantially from their expectations in the absence of more institutionalized labor market and full-fledged social service programs. Resettled villagers now face more subtle forms of institutional segmentations while the official implementation and villagers' awareness of social security and welfare programs are questionable. The study calls for a two-way approach for future research that, alongside exploring the perceptions of resettled villagers, also investigates the host society's attitudes and perceptions about these new residents.

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1. Introduction

Since the economic reform, substantial economic restructuring in China has extended urban economic functions to small towns, resulting in subsequent urban expansion in these areas (Naughton, 1995). Small towns have been converted from designated industrial production and urban agricultural product provision sites, with limited consumption and urbanization, to town-based industrialization sites, service development nodes, and emerging places for non-agricultural economic sectors characterized by a self-initiated nature (Kirby, 1985; Lo, 1989; Shen & Ma, 2005). Local governments have used expansive land policies as a means of facilitating small towns' long-term economic development and competitiveness (Han, 2010). Small towns, especially those within China's major economic regions, have gradually become part of the 'locomotives' of the country's economic growth and destinations for both investors and migrants (Chen, Zeng, & Xie, 2000; Ye & Xie, 2012). They have not only benefited from regional advantages, but many have also become the frontier areas for bottom-up land policy

initiatives. The ongoing reform of land development mechanism has redistributed land revenues and other benefits amongst various actors in order to better govern land development and improve overall wellbeing of small towns undergoing the urbanization process (Hsing, 2010; Wang, 2013).

Small town urbanization in China is now a hybrid and contested process that involves numerous actors and forces operating at multiple scales. China's urbanization is not a homogenous process because localities with different mixtures of economic and resource bases, industrial and production priorities, and institutional arrangements may apply a wide variety of strategies to foster local urbanization vitality (Lin, 2003; Ma, 2002). The urbanization process of small towns diverges significantly from that of large cities where urbanization is typically under the direct developmental control and fiscal endorsement of the state (Shen, 2006; Shen, Wong, & Feng, 2002; Wong, Shen, Feng, & Gu, 2003). Scholars have used the term 'urbanization from below' for small towns to conceptualize the critical roles of township and village governments, Town and Village Enterprises (TVEs), rural collectives, and villagers without any resource contribution from the central government in the urbanization process in the 1990s (Cui & Ma, 1999; Ma & Fan, 1994; Ma & Lin, 1993). Recently, many small township

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administrations no longer directly own or run their enterprises. Rather, they make their fortune through controlling, leasing, and managing land in the market (Ping, 2011; Wang, Tao, & Tong, 2009). Under these circumstances, landless and displaced villagers face tremendous challenges in employment, education, lifestyle adaptation, and potential marginalization in their receiving society that may bring about social tension and injustice (Ding & Lichtenberg, 2011; Hui, Bao, & Zhang, 2013; Qian, 2015; Tan, Qu, Heerink, & Mettepenningen, 2011). In response, central government policies have recently required that a range of social security programs and the long-term welfare of landless and displaced villagers should be factored into land acquisition compensation and resettlement schemes. For instance, since the enforcement of the 2004 *Land Management Law*, two guidelines - *the State Council's Decision on Deepening Land Management Reforms* and *the Guidelines for Improving Land Expropriation Compensation and Resettlement System* (by the Ministry of Land and Resources) have emphasized mandatory public notices, hearings, and consultations in the process of land expropriation and resettlement. In 2010, the State Council issued *the Urgent Circular on Further Enforcing More Rigorous Administration of Land Conversion and Villager Relocation in Land Expropriation and Effectively Protecting People's Rights and Interests* to all provincial governments. This circular expresses the central government's determination to terminate violent eviction and resettlement. However, the outcomes of these policy directives in implementation have been mixed.

This paper examines several critical aspects of the consequential socioeconomic transformation of landless and resettled villagers in China's recent small town urbanization from the perspective of affected villagers. Specifically, it probes how the institutional and spatial changes in small town urbanization have shaped landless and displaced villagers' socioeconomic transformation and configured their life adaptation. Bounded by the urban and rural dichotomy, research on China's land use reforms tends to fall into two separate camps, urban and rural, leaving small towns largely neglected. In contrast to the well-investigated top-down urbanization in China's major cities, which is primarily driven by the central government's ambition in industrialization, small town urbanization has drawn considerably less scholarly attention. Nonetheless, the role of small town in China's ambitious urbanization should not be underrated. Recently, China announced its plan to move 250 million rural residents into small towns and new cities over the next twelve years (Johnson, 2013). From the villagers' perspective, this research attempts to articulate how the institutional settings of rural land acquisition compensation and urbanized spatial-territorial reorganization exert their direct influence on the transformation of landless and displaced local village people's lives by addressing several interrelated questions: What kinds of land acquisition-related institutional initiatives and governance have been implemented to incorporate landless and resettled villagers into redistribution of resources and opportunities? How have these institutional settings and spatial transformations influenced the resettlement of newly urbanized village residents from a socioeconomic perspective? And how have land acquisition-related policies, under the joint force of community, the local state, and the market, influenced the displaced villagers' adaptation to the host society?

China's small town urbanization has generated at least three types of village-turned-small town communities. In the first case, former villages are dismantled and their villagers are dispersedly resettled into existing small town communities nearby (*fenshanjiujin anzhi*). The second type is the result of merging several former villages and their subsequent conversion to small town communities (occasionally, a large former village is converted into a small town community) (*hebing anzhi*). The third type is established

through *in situ* village-turned-small town communities (*jiudi fanpai*). Based on face-to-face questionnaire surveys in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, this study examines how the urbanization process has affected the economic opportunity, lifestyle, and social welfare of affected villagers. The survey includes villages representing the latter two types of village-turned-small town communities for two main reasons. First, the last two types have widely existed for more than two decades, so villagers' insights and reflections on their resettlement and adaptation experience are readily available. Second, the first type is less prevalent but has been increasingly adopted in very recent years to facilitate affected villagers' better adaptation to their host small town society. Therefore, it might be too early to investigate the outcomes of this type of (partially) village-turned-small town communities. Additionally, these villagers' resettlement and adaptation experience may be significantly different from that of the other two types due to their early mixture and frequent interactions with small town citizens and their 'minority' status in the communities. It is worthy to note that the resettlement communities in this study differ from diasporic migrant communities that bond across geographic distance and are in places of relative isolation in at least two aspects: their original geographic, cultural, and identity proximity to host small towns or cities and the government-engineered resettlement by a 'rural land in exchange for urban welfare' model in which resettled villagers are officially provided with urban non-agricultural household registration status (*hukou*) along with urban social security and welfare provisions.

2. Conceptual discourse of resettlement and adaptation

The shift to neoliberal governance mitigates the state's role in direct resource management, with many responsibilities in social order and services being delegated towards non-state actors while the state's role becomes fragmented and blurred in both empowerment and responsibilities in urban social affairs and economic activities. Commentators observe a 'retreating' state in an array of social service activities and the power of the state moves from state control to indirect 'corporatist' state coordination (Dickson, 2000; Duckett, 2010; Gallagher, 2004; Hsu & Hasmath, 2013). These shifts change the geometry of social power by strengthening the power of some while disempowering others (Swyngedouw, 1997). The interests of all actors are now 'locally dependent', where their motivations and coalitions are 'territorially articulated' through assessment of the spaces, policies, and events that influence relevant actors in a particular locality (Cox & Mair, 1991). The linkage between territory and land is often interpreted in a way that frames territory as a form of property (Elden, 2010). The property-authority nexus undergoes continuous restructuring, in which different market participants actively seek and contest to maximize their benefits and interests in resource redistribution through modifications in either relevant policies or governance approaches. Bargaining power and contests are usually activated by the collective endeavor of actors and depend on their access to various types of capital, human, and political resources (Jessop, 2002; Paasi, 2001).

The conceptual discourse from the West has several implications for China's small town urbanization. First, the dominant role of the local state in land-centered small town urbanization matters. Since the mid-1990s, urban expansion and local economic growth have been 'locally dependent' and motivated by land-centered urban politics and land finance (Deng & Huang, 2004; Lin, 2007; Wu & Yeh, 1997) in which the enforcement of the central state's land policies is often difficult (Hsing, 2005; Qian, 2008; Wu, 2002), and the local state circumvents the central policy constraints to marketize land resources at the expense of social objectives (Ho, 2003;

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