



A comparison of the means and ends of rural construction land consolidation: Case studies of villagers' attitudes and behaviours in Changchun City, Jilin province, China



Yan-gang Fang^{*}, Ke-jian Shi, Cai-cheng Niu

School of Geographical Sciences, Northeast Normal University, 5268 Renmin Street, Changchun, Jilin Province 130024, PR China

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ABSTRACT

Rural construction land consolidation (RCLC) is an innovative approach to coordinating the outmigration of a rural population and the increase in rural housing land, thereby protecting farmland and ensuring food security, adding to urban construction land quotas, and improving the rural habitat environment in China. Since 2005, several different models or approaches to RCLC have been practiced by local governments. Regardless of public interest in the specific projects of RCLC, its implementation is not successful without the cooperation of relevant villagers whose attitudes and behaviours in response to RCLC have thus far been given only minimal academic attention. Focusing on one of the approaches of RCLC, viz. the homestead exchange apartment approach (HEA), this paper analyses the means and ends of its practices and villagers' attitudes and behaviours in response to them based on a comparison of a failed case (Village A) and a successful case (Village B) in Changchun City, which is located in the northeast of China. The results show that the geographical location and associated socio-economic background of villages endow them with different potentials, strengths, and weaknesses in implementing HEA, the higher adaptability to urban living usually accompany with lower consolidation potential of rural construction land, and vice versa; The different means of HEA result in different ends, both absolute private property-based means and absolute population-based means are dogmatic and impractical; Under constrained socio-economic, biophysical, and institutional situations, the main factors influencing villagers' attitudes and behaviours in response to the various means of HEA include household population size, original housing conditions, livelihood, life course, and Guanxi. Critically, RCLC should follow a trial and error approach and villagers must have real opportunities to take part in the decision-making that will influence their futures.

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1. Introduction

Land consolidation (LC) can be seen as a planning instrument adapted to changing circumstances. It is, traditionally, an arable land management approach to solving land fragmentation and promoting mechanization (Grossman and Brussaard, 1992; Miranda et al., 2006; Cay et al., 2010). Currently, the objectives of LC in many countries have progressively evolved to cover more complex and wider ranges and include strategies such as promoting rural development, facilitating non-agricultural uses of rural land, optimizing the layout of urban and rural land use, and protecting the environment (Zimmermann, 1995; Pašakarnis and Maliene, 2010; Jacobs, 2000; Crecente et al., 2002; Van den Brink,

2004; Sklenicka, 2006; Van Dijk, 2007; Haldrup, 2015). This trend is especially prevalent in China because of the nation's rapid and far-reaching transition that has induced a bottle-necking of resource and environmental constraints (Wu et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2014; Yan et al., 2015; Long, 2014; Long and Liu, 2015). Long (2014) argues that LC is an indispensable approach to rural spatial restructuring—an integrated part of contemporary rural restructuring—which aims to optimize urban-rural space organization and promote coordinated urban-rural development in China. Since 2005, when the Ministry of Land and Resources of China (MLR) proposed an innovative land-use policy known as 'balancing increases in urban construction land with reduction in rural construction land' (Chengxiang Jianshe Yongdi Zengjian Guagou),¹ the

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: fangyg578@nenu.edu.cn (Y.-g. Fang).

¹ MLR, Number 207 document, 2005: to standardize the implementation of linking up increases in urban construction land with reduction in rural construction land at selected test points.

Chinese government has initiated widespread pilot schemes of rural construction land consolidation (hereafter, RCLC), hoping to address the widening discrepancy between supply and demand for construction land in terms of quantity and location (Long et al., 2012; Jiang et al., 2015). In 2010, RCLC policy and methods were revised and formally adopted by the central government of China (Li et al., 2014). Chen (2010), the head of the Office of Central Rural Work Leading Group in China, however, has expressed concern over RCLC, as he finds that according to statistical data from Japan and Taiwan, the rural population and number of rural households are roughly the same, thus indicating that at least one person is left to do farm work (i.e., the majority of rural households still exist in more developed regions) (Chen, 2010). Ye and Meng (2012) contend that farmers need rural housing to perform farm work, resettlement in apartments has undermined agricultural production conditions and deprived farmers of the resource base of their livelihood.

The need to respect farmers' wills and interests in the processes of RCLC has been repeatedly emphasized, while executives of RCLC complain that this type of respect has undermined the possibility of agreement between different farmers and blocked effective rural construction reclamation. Until recently, less in-depth academic attention has been paid to the means and ends of various modes of compensation for the reclamation of old housing and new apartment allocation schemes from the perspective of villagers' attitudes and behaviours. Moreover, there are significant spatial variations in the experience and impact of economic and social restructuring in rural China (Li et al., 2015), as well as in the regional features and phase characteristics of rural spatial restructuring (Long, 2014). More research attention should be paid to regional engineering technology, policy and mechanisms, and modes of rural LC suitable to local conditions (Long, 2014; Peng, 2015; Zhang and Wu, 2015). Thus, by means of a case comparison in Changchun City, Jilin province, the present research attempts to determine those agreements that exist between different rural households with regard to the ostensibly perfect RCLC project. Have the multiple aims of RCLC—such as supplying construction land for industrialization, protecting farmland, securing food supplies, and coordinating urban and rural development—been fulfilled without disappointing rural households? If the answer to this question is no, we must then ask by whom and to what extent have the ends been agreed upon, as well as who, to what extent, and by what means, rural land consolidation practices affect.

This paper is organized into five main parts. In the first part, the theoretical and practical background of RCLC is discussed to establish a baseline for case comparison. Part 2 provides a review of the existing research on RCLC in China. Part 3 provides detailed information pertaining to the study area, research methods, and data collection processes. In Part 4, the means and ends of one of the approaches of RCLC, the so called Homestead Exchange for Apartment approach (hereafter, HEA), are analysed through a comparison of a failed case (Village A) and a successful case (Village B). In the final part, conclusions and policy implications are outlined.

2. The background of RCLC

Since 1978, the government's focus (*Gongzuo Zhongxin*) in China has shifted from class struggle (*Jieji Douzheng*) to economic construction (*Jingji Jianshe*). Development—and especially economic development related to Chinese socialist ideologies—has been vividly promoted in Deng Xiaoping's well-known sayings: "Development is the hard truth" (*Fazhan shi Ying Daoli*) and "Poverty is not socialism" (*Pinqiong Bushi Shehuizhuyi*). China believes that economic progress can be achieved when the state leads the nation in

promoting economic changes. Industrialization and urbanization have thus become the state's primary means for achieving economic goals. Public ownership, planning, and goal setting became institutional means by which to achieve national economic development. The needs of land, labour, and capital for industrialization and urbanization were given highest priority. The Land and Resources Department supplied construction land made available by land requisition and consolidation. The Housing and Urban-Rural Development Department planned and regulated the production of living spaces to enhance agglomeration efficiencies. The Development and Reform Commission drew up industrial policies and allocated capital to encourage or restrict the development of specific industries.

At the early stage of reform and liberalization, this system seemed to be running well in these separate functional departments, and only minimal cross-department coordination was needed. The land needed for industrialization and urbanization could be supplied adequately at a low price. Similarly, the loss of cultivated land could be supplemented by exploiting and improving untouched land. Along with the further development and expansion of the economy and its accompanying dramatic social changes, however, conflicts between these departments' goals intensified gradually. To maximize economic efficiency, it makes sense to concentrate resources on those existing industrial heartlands surrounding China's metropolitan regions. These activities result in encroachment on high-quality farmland which cannot be replenished by reclaiming untouched land without generating unacceptable negative ecological and environmental effects. Conversely, rapid rural out-migration concomitant with the increasing amount of rural construction land is recognized as a big issue by academics and government authorities alike. In addition, the improvement of rural habitats has faced the challenge of low cost effectiveness resulting from a decrease in village populations. Therefore, mobilizing rural residents to abandon their courtyard-style housing and move to multi-storey apartments—to reclaim the old settlements into farmland and meet the quota of construction land—is a process that has come into vogue since the mid-2000s.

Besides the administrative sector of land and resources, this type of mobilization would be complicated without the support of the administrative sector of housing and urban-rural development (which is in charge of urban-rural planning and construction activities) and the administrative sector of development and reform (which is in charge of industrial development, layout, and infrastructure projects). These departments have also justified mobilization efforts by citing a variety of different names and goals. First, MLR argued that the "red line", which specifies that 1.8 billion mu (120 million ha) of arable land must be maintained for food security in China, could be ensured through RCLC. In 2005, the Ministry of Land and Resources initiated an experimental balancing of increases in urban construction land with a reduction in rural construction land. Second, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development argued that in so doing, the living conditions and environment of rural communities would be improved. In 2008, the *Law of Urban and Rural Planning* came into force and brought the formerly disordered rural construction activities into the scope of planning regulations (SCNPC, 2007). Local governments were then authorized to guide villagers to make reasonable construction decisions in light of local rural economic and social development levels. Third, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) noted that RCLC would balance the distribution of the population across the land, increase economic efficiency, and gradually achieve the equalization of basic urban-rural public services. NDRC began to draft Major Function-Oriented Zoning in 2006 to balance regional development potential, carrying capacity, and

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