



Rural settlement restructuring based on analysis of the peasant household symbiotic system at village level: A Case Study of Fengsi Village in Chongqing, China[☆]

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ABSTRACT

As participants and beneficiaries in the construction of beautiful rural countryside areas, peasant households can have an important impact on the performance of the new rural construction policies, their individual behaviors have become a much-studied topic in international rural studies. Starting from the concept of “put people first” and adopting the concept of a symbiotic system among peasant households, this study analyzes the elements, mechanisms, and operations of a peasant household symbiotic system in the process of rural settlement restructuring, taking Fengsi village in Chongqing, China as an example. Retaining traditional rural interpersonal relationship which takes lineal, collateral and terrain as the links, this study establishes a symbiotic relationship; that is, resources, benefits, and responsibility for environmental construction are shared. Accordingly, the spatial pattern developed into “the axis-line-distribution along the road”, which included one living-oriented functional group and three production-oriented functional groups. The one living-oriented functional group will be located at the junction of roads and rivers in the southeast of the village with three different types of peasant household, including the non-agricultural diversification type, the non-agricultural specialization type, and the part-time development type. The three production-oriented functional groups will situate along country roads in the middle and east of the village with three other different types of peasant household, including the agricultural diversification type, the agricultural specialization type, and the part-time development type. This study, therefore, provides theoretical support and methodological guidance for the construction of Chinese rural human settlements that are suitable for living in, convenient for employment, and pleasant to travel around.

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1. Introduction

Rural China has experienced a rapid and far-reaching transition period over the past three decades since Deng Xiaoping launched economic reforms in 1978 (Long et al., 2012). In particular, in 2006, the Chinese government introduced a program for ‘Building a New Countryside’, an integrated approach to rural development, which accelerated political, social, and economic changes in Chinese rural

areas (Liu et al., 2011). The traditional livelihoods provided by agricultural production have shifted towards a new economy based on the commercialization of rural space (Woods, 2005; Fløysanda and Jakobsen, 2007). Consequently, rural settlements have also undergone significant transformations, which have entailed a revival in the study of the social and economic ‘problems’ of rural settlements, and have been the scene of spectacular changes that have resulted in the intense differentiation of rural settlements and rural population mobility in recent years in China. As a consequence, the function of rural settlements will be broadened from areas only for living and producing to an integration of residential, productive and recreational areas, accompanying with the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and agricultural

[☆] Linpan are the trees associated with the peasants’ homesteads.

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modernization (Long et al., 2009, 2010). It is predicted that there will be 600 million people living in rural China by 2030, and villages will still be the main habitation type for China's rural population (Zou et al., 2012; Cui, 2014). Consequently, there is clearly a need for profound analysis of rural settlements with respect to their social, economic and human processes.

'Building a New Countryside' is, to a certain extent, a policy particularly relevant to countryside planning, which aims to achieve an integrated of urban and rural development (Long et al., 2010). In past decades, the policies issued by the Chinese government provided all kinds of macroscopic support measures, and a series of significant achievements have been made in fields such as living conditions, natural ecological landscape, infrastructure and public services. Many progresses have also been achieved in the restructuring of rural settlements (Long et al., 2016). However, many problems have arisen. For example, peasant households that lost their lands have been forced to move into apartments away from their original houses; the construction of rural settlements has tended to be oversimplified, homogenized and standardized; villages and towns have become similar in appearance, although many new buildings have been built, the original living environment of the village has not changed. The reasons may be as follows: on the one hand, the living conditions of new rural settlements cannot satisfy the living and production demand of peasant households; on the other hand, the traditional interpersonal relationships which takes lineal, collateral and terrain as the links have been broken, consequently, peasant households that used to cooperate are alienated from each other. To alleviate the above problems, many extensive and in-depth studies have been conducted. It has been agreed that rural settlement restructuring is the key to enhancing the comfort of rural life, bringing people better employment, and making it more pleasurable to travel. However, there are various characteristics of rural space in different periods during the process of rural restructuring.

The term 'restructuring' is commonly used to characterize shifts in economic trajectories and political strategies of advanced nations following the end of the postwar boom in the 1970s in both the 'developed world' of Europe and North America and the 'developing world' of the global south (Tonts and Atherleya, 2005). Yet, rural restructuring in China has distinctive characteristics. On the one hand, rural restructuring continues to be strongly shaped by national macroeconomic development strategies that tend to treat rural China as a singular entity (Long et al., 2012). On the other hand, globalization has been identified as a key driver of urbanization and industrialization in China (Wang and Fang, 2011; Ma et al., 2010), and also has a direct impact on social, economic, and environmental change in rural regions. In fact, China's rural restructuring has not only been rapid, but has also combined changes that were experienced in rural Europe during the early-to-mid twentieth century (such as urbanization, depopulation, industrialization and the decreasing importance of agricultural employment) with aspects of contemporary European rural restructuring (such as the commodification of rural cultural and environmental resources, and integration into global networks) (Cloke et al., 1997; Gant et al., 2011; Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001; Robinson, 2004; Woods, 2005). Therefore, presented with opportunities for policy changes among fields such as economic development, environmental conservation and land-use planning, there is a need for policy solutions that apply lessons learned from the 'West' to the Chinese situation (Long and Liu, 2012).

Detailed peasant household surveys took place between 2009 and 2014 in 10 villages of Chongqing in Western China to better understand the new characteristics of rural settlements (Wang et al., 2011, 2014). The results of the surveys we have carried out before are summarized here. Firstly, significant changes for

selecting the location of rural settlements took place – shifting from farming radius, breeding traditions, living habits, and Chinese traditional clans to considering the natural environment and pleasant residential environments, convenient transport and solid infrastructures. Secondly, compared with the traditional distribution pattern of rural settlements – namely 'big scattered and small agglomeration' (in general, an aggregation zone is composed of four to five households, with others scattered around the village), rural China currently presents a new pattern of 'mass concentration and small agglomeration' (most families live in the same place, which is composed of 100–500 households, a few of which are scattered around the village) with advanced infrastructure and intensive land use. The tendency for the type of spatial distribution has been transformed from isolated distribution restricted by rivers or mountains to linear, planar and clustered arrangements along-side roads or aggregation zones. Thirdly, the restriction of natural environments and the social relationships shaped by kinship and religious beliefs have collapsed in the aggregation zones, where a kind of urban and rural function integration has emerged. The new aggregation zones present a series of new characteristics that blend artificial landscapes and original natural settings, combine modern entertainment and traditional culture, and create new neighborly relationships. This paper presents a study in which new methods of a peasant household symbiotic system are introduced as a means for restructuring rural settlements. The aims of this paper are: (1) to analyze the mechanism and operational processes of the peasant household symbiotic system; (2) to distinguish the symbiotic relationship of different peasant households during the process of sharing materials, information, and energy and carry out rural settlement restructuring; (3) to take a village as a case study that offers new ideas and methods for building a rural human settlement.

2. Introducing the peasant household symbiotic system

2.1. Elements and functions of the symbiotic system

The concept of symbiosis was first proposed by Heinrich Anton de Bary, a German mycologist, in 1879 (Ahmadjian and Paracer, 2000). Symbiosis is a process involving long-term physical interaction between two or more biological organisms, and usually involves a mutual interaction in which each individual entity is functioned depend upon the other. Since the 1950s, the theory of symbiosis has been widely put into practice in various fields, including economics (Dong et al., 2013), management science (Wen and Frank, 2014; Omacini et al., 2012), agricultural science (Omacini et al., 2012), and industrial ecology (Wang et al., 2014). With the researches extend, and practice increase, the application of symbiosis theory has continued to expand across disciplines. The peasant household symbiotic system is a collection of symbiotic relationships that result in interaction among different peasant households who share the infrastructure, public service facilities and public space under natural, cultural, and artificial environments on a village scale (Yuan, 1998; Hird, 2010). They are mainly composed of symbiotic units, symbiotic interfaces, symbiotic patterns, and symbiotic environments (Wang et al., 2014).

Symbiotic unit A symbiotic unit is the basic unit of energy production and exchange in a symbiotic relationship. It is very important to satisfy a peasant household's demands because the peasants are the participants and beneficiaries of rural settlement restructuring. So, peasant households have been identified as symbiotic units of this peasant household symbiotic system. Analysis of the constant supply of symbiotic ability is rapidly becoming a focus of new research direction of rural settlement restructuring.

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