



# Spatial restructuring through poverty alleviation resettlement in rural China



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## ABSTRACT

Poverty alleviation resettlement (PAR) is one of China's key poverty reduction initiatives. Through this state-led resettlement programme, the government aims to improve the living standards and access to infrastructure and services of the rural poor. This paper examines PAR from the perspective of spatial restructuring through a household survey conducted in Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces. A total of 30 resettlement sites were examined. The results show that PAR has two spatial forms: long-distance resettlement, which resettles people to cities or towns, and short-distance resettlement, which resettles people within the administrative boundaries of their village or to a nearby village. Furthermore, the type of spatial restructuring is an important factor shaping the outcome of resettlement. While long-distance resettlement outperforms short-distance resettlement in terms of gains in income, the advantage is offset by higher post-resettlement expenses. Furthermore, long-distance resettlers face a greater challenge in securing non-agricultural employment. Consequently, the level of satisfaction is lower among long-distance resettlers. Significant challenges remain to be addressed for both types of resettlement, including establishing two-way communication between villagers and the government about resettlement plans and providing better financial support for the resettlers, safeguards for the livelihoods of non-movers, and post-resettlement support programmes to help resettlers adjust to their new environments.

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## 1. Introduction

Rural China has undergone an unprecedented spatial transformation since the reform period began in 1978. Relevant scholarly studies are mainly rooted in three strands of literature. The first focuses on the loss of farmland and rural habitat to urbanisation and industrialisation (Lin, 2001; Liu et al., 2010; Smith, 2014; Wang et al., 2009; Wu, 2009; Zhu et al., 2014). In this process, vast tracts of rural land, typically at the outskirts of cities, are expropriated, cleared, parcelled out by the local government, and sold to property developers (Lin and Ho, 2005; Ong, 2014; Xu et al., 2011) or used for the establishment of various types of development zones and industrial parks (Yang and Wang, 2008; Zhang, 2011). At the same time, spontaneous rural industrialisation at the grassroots level has become another driver of spatial restructuring (Lin, 2001; Long

et al., 2009). Although the economic contributions of these spatial restructuring processes are significant, the negative effects that involve the loss of fertile cropland, and consequently, food security are unsustainable (Chen, 2007; Deng et al., 2015). Moreover, land expropriation is often involuntary from the perspective of the affected peasants, and the results are usually to their detriment (Chen et al., 2013; Lin and Zhu, 2014; Sargeson, 2013). In fact, the predicament of landless farmers has become a serious social problem and a common source of social unrest in China (He et al., 2009; Zhang and Donaldson, 2013).

The second strand of literature focuses on spatial restructuring that results in an increase in or optimisation of farmland, and this type of spatial restructuring can be considered as a policy response to counter the negative effects of urbanisation-induced spatial restructuring. One example is the national-level land consolidation initiative, which addresses the problems of land fragmentation, cropland abandonment, and rural hollowing by concentrating rural settlements (Huang et al., 2011; Li et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2014a, 2014b; Long, 2014). Typically, a number of rural settlements are

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consolidated into a large, centralised village, and vacant residential land is reclaimed to cropland. Unlike urbanisation-induced land appropriation, rural restructuring through land consolidation is considered by the government and some scholars as a win-win strategy that positively influences both food production and the living conditions of rural households, although in reality, poor implementation and lack of public consultation often lead to local resistance and even to violent protests (Long et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2014).

The third and final strand of literature links rural spatial restructuring to environmental conservation. Studies in this group have examined a wide variety of programmes with different objectives, approaches, and institutional arrangements. For instance, the Grain-for-Green programme provides incentives to farmers to convert low-productivity cropland into forest or grassland (Delang and Wang, 2013; Zhou et al., 2012). From 1999 to 2014, the central government has invested 405.7 billion CNY in the programme, and has achieved approximately 30 million hectare of reforestation. Another key example is environmental resettlement: the forced relocation of people from nature reserves and ecological fragile areas (Rogers and Wang, 2006; Fan et al., 2015). The traditionally nomadic ethnic minorities, especially the Mongolians and the Tibetans, have been disproportionately affected by environmental resettlement, and the impacts of resettlement on their cultural identity, pastoral livelihoods, and social cohesion are but some of the issues that need to be addressed (Bauer, 2015; Dickinson and Webber, 2007).

This paper introduces poverty alleviation resettlement (PAR) as an important and distinct form of spatial restructuring in rural China. PAR began in the 1980s and has become one of China's key approaches to eliminating poverty in rural areas, accomplished by relocating poor households from marginal land. Through this national-level initiative, the government hopes to improve the living standards, incomes, and access to infrastructure and services of poor rural people. PAR differs from the aforementioned forms of rural spatial restructuring because of its emphasis on voluntarism and the wellbeing of the resettlers. However, there are few existing studies on PAR and none have approached the subject from a spatial perspective. Through empirical analysis, this study not only shows that PAR has produced two types of rural spatial restructuring (long-distance resettlement and short-distance resettlement) but also demonstrates that the type of spatial restructuring is an important factor shaping the outcome of resettlement. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature of poverty alleviation resettlement. Section 3 describes the data collection methods; results are presented in Section 4; and, finally, in Section 5, the key implications of the study are addressed.

## 2. Poverty alleviation resettlement

China's efforts to end poverty, including the de-collectivisation of agriculture, market liberalisation, relaxing migration restrictions, budgetary grants, subsidised loans, microfinance, and food-for-work have lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty (Démurger and Xu, 2011; Montalvo and Ravallion, 2010; Rogers, 2014; Tsai, 2004; Van de Walle, 2002). However, patches of poverty remain in rural China. Recent estimates indicate that approximately 147–196 million rural Chinese still live below the USD 1.25 per day poverty threshold (Zhang et al., 2014). Most of these people live on remote, isolated, and marginal lands in western and central China (Olivia et al., 2011). In an effort to eradicate stubborn poverty in the most remote and marginal areas of the country, the Chinese government turned to resettlement. China's PAR first appeared in the 1980s as a pilot programme in the western

regions of the Loess Plateau, which has traditionally been one of the poorest areas of the country because of its mountainous terrain, infertile land, soil erosion, low rainfall, and frequent droughts. In the 1980s, there were approximately 7 million people living in the region and approximately 70% of them were reportedly severely impoverished. In 1983, the central government began resettling people in newly developed irrigated areas. A subsidy of CNY 60–80 per mu of land (1 mu = 0.067 ha) was provided to assist with resettlement, and each household was granted a subsidy of CNY 400 for the purpose of building a new house. During the next 10 years, the pilot programme resettled almost half a million people. In 1993, the central government began to expand the PAR programme into other parts of the country. Official data indicate that the programme had relocated more than 7.7 million people by the end of 2010, making it one of the world's largest poverty alleviation resettlement programmes (State Council, 2011).

The official discourse emphasises PAR as a type of voluntary resettlement and the rights of the resettlers are protected by a number of institutionalised mechanisms (Xue et al., 2013). A typical PAR project has three stages: pre-resettlement, resettlement, and post-resettlement. At the pre-resettlement stage, the local governments select a number of villages that satisfy the national and provincial criteria for PAR projects. The local governments then approach village committees (the self-governing bodies at the village level) to discuss the details of resettlement, such as resettlement sites and timelines. If an agreement between the two parties can be reached, public consultation follows, in which the policies and regulations associated with PAR are explained to villagers. They are also informed of the resettlement timelines, the compensation packages, and the locations of the proposed resettlement sites. A general assembly is then convened and a vote takes place to determine whether the village will participate in the PAR programme. If the number of villagers agreeing to resettle is less than the threshold percentage (usually 80%), the village is removed from the process. If more than one resettlement site is offered, the villagers vote for their preferred resettlement site. Alternatively, villages can also apply directly to the local government for poverty resettlement.

In the resettlement stage, the village committee and the local government are responsible for the design and construction of the resettlement site and for assigning and distributing the new houses to the migrants. The local government, after determining the available budget, designates a quota for the number of households that can be resettled. If the number of households desiring to move exceeds the quota, then the village committee is tasked with choosing households to resettle by a variety of methods, such as first-come-first-served, lottery, or specific criteria (e.g., age). The government shoulders the cost of building the infrastructure at the resettlement site, but individual households are responsible for the cost of building and furnishing their new homes. To help pay for housing construction costs, households are eligible to receive a subsidy. The subsidy is distributed either through direct deposit to the migrants' bank accounts or (more commonly) through transfer to the village committee, which then distributes it to the migrants. The resettlement stage is considered complete when the construction is finished and the migrants are relocated.

The final stage is post-resettlement. At this stage, the government may organise some skill-training workshops to help the migrants adapt to their new environment. However, such practices are far from universal and the lack of support has been criticised as a major barrier to migrants adapting to their new situations (Xue et al., 2013).

Poverty alleviation resettlement is not unique to China. Comparable poverty alleviation resettlement programmes can be found in many developing countries, as governments often consider

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