



# The transformation of the village collective in urbanising China: A historical institutional analysis



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## ABSTRACT

The reform era in China has been characterised by rapid territorial processes that have advanced the reach of the urban for furthering capital accumulation. As borders were redrawn to enlarge cities by incorporating the surrounding countryside, villages located at the rural-urban interface have found themselves absorbed and administratively converted into urban neighbourhoods. Economic restructuring and territorial remaking have further removed all structural traces of rurality from these physically vanished villages. Despite the magnitude of change, however, the institutional arrangements that define and maintain the village as a collective community of interests have remained effective. Drawing on the analytical framework of historical institutionalism, this paper treats the Chinese village as a historical entity emerging from socialist collectivisation and examines how the socialist institutions of collective property and redistributive mechanisms have continued to persist in the reform-era village. Through shareholding reform and subsequent corporatisation, the village as a collective has been preserved and reconsolidated through the renewal and revitalisation of inherited institutional arrangements. An examination of the resilience of the village collective in urbanising China not only sheds light on the structures and processes of power that have contributed to its continued vitality, but also generates insight into how the “village” or the “rural” should be conceived of in the context of rapid administrative, economic and territorial transformation.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid transformation of the post-socialist countryside has blurred the boundary between the rural and the urban, and created a variegated landscape of distinct territorialities in reform-era China. A spatial form that has perhaps become emblematic of such intensive processes of change is the “urban village”, or *chengzhongcun* in Chinese: rural settlements that are situated within a city’s jurisdictional boundary. Their growth in numbers has paralleled the continued expansion of China’s fast-growing metropolises in the past three decades. As borders were redrawn to enlarge cities by incorporating the surrounding hinterland, villages in the vicinity were administratively absorbed and converted into urban constituents. These rural communities have since co-evolved as part of the cities as they become increasingly caught up in networks of local, regional and global flows of goods, services, capital and people.

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Academic discourses have often portrayed urban villages as informal or transitional entities that are neither completely rural nor urban. By the 1990s and 2000s, urban villages in major cities such as Beijing, Shenzhen and Guangzhou have evolved into high-density settlements housing not only indigenous villagers but also the large numbers of rural-urban migrants who had moved to cities in search of jobs and opportunities. The urban studies literature has highlighted the social function of urban villages as informal housing markets (Zhang et al., 2003; Song et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2009; Li and Wu, 2013; He, 2014). Urban villages are viewed as “transitional neighbourhoods” that facilitate urbanisation processes by easing rural migrants’ gradual integration into urban society (Liu et al., 2010). Other scholars considered urban villages to be “informal settlements” characterised by regulatory issues including fragmented land ownership, ambiguous property rights and lax development control (Tian, 2008; Wu et al., 2013). Their prevalence has been seen as symptomatic of enduring patterns of rural-urban inequality, social exclusion and spatial segregation (Zhang, 2011). From the perspective of governance, urban villages have been described as communities that are “not rural but not urban” (Tang,

2015). They represent “incomplete urbanisation projects” that are poorly and asymmetrically integrated into urban administrative and fiscal systems (Po, 2012).

The prevailing representation of urban villages as transitional entities awaiting further urbanisation or fuller integration seems to postulate a singular scale or continuum between the rural and the urban, where the urban village constitutes a transitory, in-between form that would progress with linearity towards full urbanity. There is, however, nothing inevitable about the evolution of rural localities towards any single homogeneous outcome. Indeed, scholars have called into question dichotomous conceptions of rural and urban that imply drawing a categorical divide between two opposed groups (Mormont, 1990; Halfacree, 1993; Woods, 2005). There is thus need to go beyond linear conceptualisations of rural-urban *transition*, and examine change from the perspective of rural *transformation* which gives consideration to the diversity of institutional outcomes that could result from rural restructuring. Such a perspective would enable us to better analyse the multidimensional processes of change that contribute to the emergence in China of rural spaces that are increasingly differentiated, paralleling similar developments in other areas of the global countryside (Long and Woods, 2011; Marsden, 1998; Murdoch et al., 2003; Woods, 2007). A non-linear view of rural transformation also opens up a discursive space for the consideration of how the very meaning of rurality is being redefined and reconstituted in post-agrarian societies.

This paper draws on the analytical framework of historical institutionalism to explore rural transformation and institutional change in the context of urbanising China. The theoretical and methodological distinctiveness of historical institutionalism lies in its emphasis on explaining institutional reproduction and change through an examination of where institutions came from, how they are maintained, and the ways they have adaptively transformed over time. By analysing rural transformation in China using an institutionalist framework, this paper treats the urban village as a historical entity emerging from socialist collectivisation and examines the way its underpinning institutions have evolved and reconfigured in the reform era. Specifically, it focuses on those institutional arrangements that have continued to define and maintain the village as a collective community of interests, namely a property rights regime characterised by collective ownership and redistributive mechanisms. The notion of the village as a collective (*cun jiti*) has its ideological origin in the Maoist era of collectivisation, but the notion has persisted in contemporary times despite the significant administrative, economic and territorial restructuring of the post-socialist countryside. An inquiry into the mechanisms of institutional reproduction and change would not only shed light on the structures and processes of power that maintain the village collective, but also generate insight into how the “village” or the “rural” should be conceived of in the context of rapid transformation.

To examine these dynamics, this paper takes as its case study a village that has undergone dramatic change in the reform era. Liede is a typical urban village located in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, in southern coastal China. A village community that dates its settlement history to the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127AD), Liede has for centuries been an agrarian economy up until the reform era. From the 1980s onwards, the village has seen a gradual diminution of its agricultural harvest as its farmland was successively expropriated for industrial and commercial development. Into the 2000s, Liede lost its rural status and was nominally converted into an urban administrative unit. The subsequent demolition of the entire village and its redevelopment into a modern, mixed-use neighbourhood further removed any structural traces of rurality from the physically vanished village.

Despite the magnitude of change, however, those institutional arrangements that define Liede as a collective have remained operational. Through shareholding reforms and corporatisation, the village collective has been preserved and reconsolidated as a shareholding cooperative and later in the form of a shareholding company. The continued effectiveness of collective property and redistributive mechanisms has maintained Liede as a corporate community of interests. Together with others, these territorially entrenched communities constitute distinct localisms in China's increasingly differentiated geography.

## 2. Historical institutional analysis and rural transformation

### 2.1. Historical institutionalism: a brief overview

This paper investigates rural transformation by adopting an institutionalist perspective that gives analytical emphasis to the evolution and transformation of institutions. Institutions are rules and constraints devised by human actors that structure political, economic and social interaction (North, 1991). These include both formal rules such as constitutions, laws and property rights, as well as informal constraints such as customs, traditions and codes of conduct (North, 1991). By distinguishing between actions that are “appropriate” and “inappropriate”, “right” and “wrong”, institutions govern behaviour and organise it into patterns that reliable and predictable (Streck and Thelen, 2005). As such, institutions can be seen as “building-blocks of social order” that represent “collectively enforced expectations with respect to the behaviour of specific categories of actors or to the performance of certain activities” (Streck and Thelen, 2005: 9). Given this paper's focus on the evolution of institutions over time, it draws on the historical variant of institutional analysis (Thelen, 1999). Historical institutionalism seeks to explain institutional continuity and change by paying attention to “how institutions emerge from and are embedded in concrete temporal processes” (Thelen, 1999: 369). It examines where institutions came from, what has sustained them and how they have changed over time, in order to gain insights into institutional resilience and the modes and mechanisms of change (Thelen, 2004).

Within the historical institutionalism literature, a broad distinction can be drawn between those who emphasise institutional stability and the “stickiness” of institutions, and those who advocate an incrementalist model of gradual continuous change (Pierson, 2004). In the former view, institutions demonstrate long periods of continuity and stability during which existing arrangements are reproduced through self-reinforcing, increasing returns processes of path dependency. Institutional change occurs when these processes are punctuated by abrupt, exogenous shocks that open up a short period of relative structural indeterminism during which critical decisions made by key actors choose paths that fix the institution down for another period of stability. This view, often characterised as the punctuated equilibrium model, postulates a “dualist” conception of institutional development based on an alternation between long periods of institutional reproduction and brief moments of “critical junctures” where agency plays a key role in shaping outcomes (Pierson, 2000; Cappocia and Kelemen, 2007).

An alternative view of institutional development, represented by the incrementalist model, holds that institutions evolve and change continuously. Institutions do not just emerge, break down and get replaced, they also evolve and adapt to new conditions without radical disruptions (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Transformative change might result from an accumulation of gradual and incremental change, rather than from exogenous shocks and ruptures. Advocates of this model take the position that slow and piecemeal changes, while less dramatic than wholesale

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