

The countryside under multiple high-tension lines: A perspective on the rural construction of Heping Village, Shanghai

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Urbanization
Rural construction
Production of space
Community construction
Shanghai
China

ABSTRACT

Different rural developmental options exist because of different national and regional contexts. Since its reform and opening-up policy, China has undergone rapid urbanization and development, and rural-urban relationships have become disjointed. China's attempts to change these circumstances are inadequate. A new movement known as “rural construction,” which aims to promote or direct the social or economic development of rural areas, has been gaining momentum in recent years. This paper takes Heping village in Shanghai as a typical case of rural construction, and integrates the methods of statistics, field investigation, and personal participation into rural research. The village presents challenges related to multiple “high-tension lines,” literally and figuratively. In a literal sense, physical high-tension lines are located near residents' houses; in a figurative sense, high-tension lines come from power and capital, symbolizing the predominant top-down mode of rural construction and imbalance of allocated funds in the process of rural planning; and finally, psychological high-tension lines make the residents lose their sense of belonging. The local governments often regard village construction projects as opportunities to showcase their work, failing to involve villagers in the decision-making process; movements such as beautification of the countryside lack bottom-up initiatives. However, a collaborative approach between the government and residents is ideal in rural planning and construction. The theories of rural research should be renewed under the context of the changing rural world. It is worth exploring some new methods like metaphor into rural studies.

1. Introduction

Urbanization in China has been a dominant focus of international attention (Yang, 2013), and has been studied by many scholars in different fields (Friedmann, 2006; Chan, 2010; Liu et al., 2010; Long et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2016). Urbanization brings about not only economic development but also different ecological and social problems (Tao and Xu, 2005; Zhao et al., 2006; Zhu and Zheng, 2012). China's rapid urbanization since 1978 has significantly influenced its rural development, aggravating the conflict between the two categories of areas (Yu et al., 2014; Chen, 2007). The coordinated development of urban and rural areas in China declined significantly from 2000 to 2008; in certain developed areas, urban-rural development is particularly disjointed (Long et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2013). China has carried out a series of “new rural construction” programs since 2005, titled diversely as “livable rural planning,” “mountain support planning,” and “beautiful countryside construction,” all allegedly aiming to improve residents' lives, foster a civilized social atmosphere, and develop appealing and

organized villages that can be efficiently managed (Long and Woods, 2011). However, these plans have ultimately failed to enhance rural areas as promoted.

Contemporary research of rural areas and geography has begun including the role of rurality, the future of rural space, and global issues such as climate change and food security (Whatmore, 1993; Woods, 2009a, 2011; 2012). Since the 1990s, rural construction has become a popular issue among scholars (Marsden et al., 1990; Whatmore et al., 1990; Marsden, 1996; Wilson, 1995; Nelson, 2001; Woods, 2005; Tu and Long, 2017). Woods (2009b) defined rural reconstruction as an interconnected process of reshaping rural society, mobility, and economic structures. The process of rural construction in China is characterized by dynamic, multi-scalar, and hybrid thought (Long et al., 2012). In the context of urbanization, agriculture is undergoing a transformation precipitated by changes in industrialization and migration (Qin and Liao, 2016; Qian et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2016). Driven by industrialization and urbanization, rural land use has been extensively restructured (Liu et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2016; Yep and

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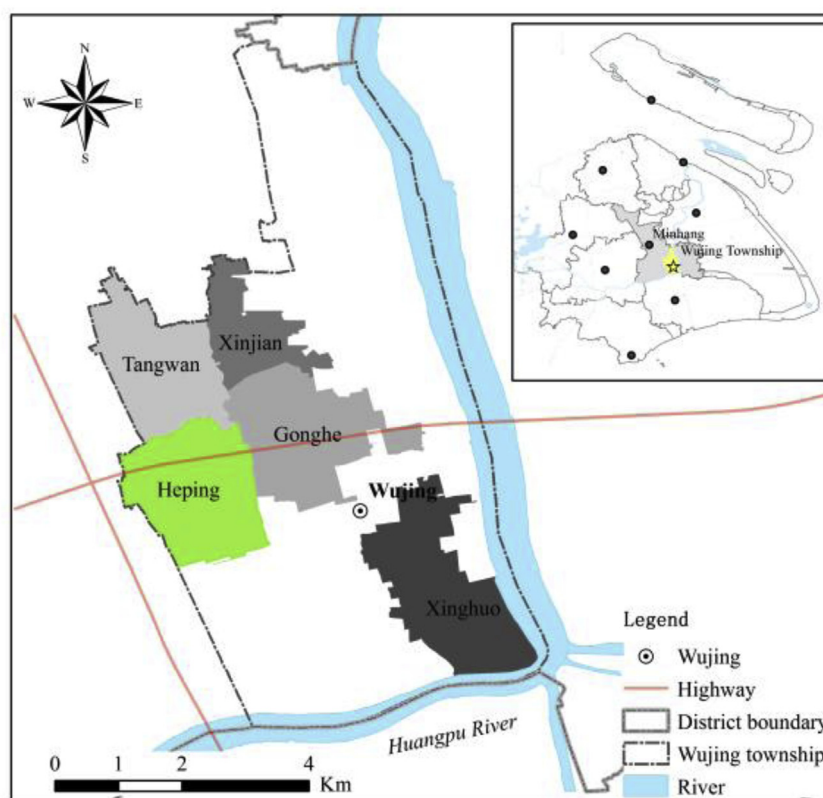


Fig. 1. Location of Heping village in Shanghai.

Forrest, 2016; Long et al., 2016).

Rural space is the essential issue in rural construction. A critical theory of urbanization is the production of space, widely considered in many urban studies (McGee, 2009; Chen and de'Medici, 2010; Buser, 2012; Nasongkhla and Sintusingha, 2013; Ye et al., 2017). While compared to the relative plethora of research concerning space in cities, there are few studies contemplating rural production of space (Halfacree, 2007; Frisvoll, 2012), although some scholars have explored the theory of production of space as a tool to interpret the space and politics of the countryside (Yao et al., 2017; Wilson, 2013).

The construction of urban and rural space in China is accelerating. According to the 2016 Statistics Bulletin on Urban-Rural Construction, there were 20,883 towns in China, with 958 million people registered as village residents; China's investment in village construction occupies first place in its total investment in the construction of villages and towns (MOHURD, 2016). China has paid increasing attention to the development of the countryside, with moderate success, but some villages in China remain in crisis. As a global megalopolis, Shanghai has experienced rapid urbanization and globalization; however, rural development in Shanghai is affected by various factors such as new policies, large numbers of migrants, and access to funds. Thus, Shanghai's circumstances can be seen as a kind of hybrid of urban and rural development.

"Representations of rurality remain a significant feature in the spatialisation of everyday discourse, and therefore remain a legitimate focus for investigation in rural studies" (Cloke, 2003). In Shanghai, development of the rural area is not met with optimism. In particular, rural life exists under the "multiple high-tension lines" situation: there are the physical high-tension lines, as well as the high-tension lines in the power, capital, and psychological senses, decreasing the residents' sense of belonging, and causing a general lack of interest that hinders Shanghai's rural construction. Therefore, taking Heping Village of Wujing Town in Shanghai as an example, this paper aims to uncover and specify the realities of China's rural redevelopment.

Rural construction is a complex process that involves many aspects of social and economic activities. Previous studies on rural construction often elaborated upon the rural elements, such as systems and classes, and failed to consider any theory integrating social-economic factors including offering insufficient critiques. Therefore, based on the critical theory of production of space which is defined as the interaction between the urban and its space changed by capital or power (Ye et al., 2014), this paper aims to answer the following questions: "What is the current status of rural construction in China?", "What factors led to such a result?", and finally, "What are the focuses of China's rural construction in the future?" In addition, this paper provides two new perspectives. Compared with previous statements on rural issues, especially regarding China, we analyze rural construction in China from a critical perspective. More importantly, we use a metaphor, the high-tension line, to narrate and explain rural construction in Shanghai. In this paper, the high-tension line serves as fact, landscape, and metaphor. On the one hand, the physical high-tension line exists in reality. On the other hand, it symbolizes the high-tension line created by an imbalance of power and capital, as well as that in an individual's spirit. Metaphors such as this are rarely used in current rural studies except as by Cloke (2003), whose *Country Visions* cover in particular illustrated the complexity of countryside, full of tension and imagination; the metaphor of the high-tension line is also very important in the rural study.

This paper employs Shanghai's Heping Village as an example to analyze the status and driving forces of rural construction, and includes five sections. Following the introduction, the details of the research area and data and research methods are shown. The third section analyzes the status of rural construction in the case area. The fourth section discusses suggestions for future rural construction in Heping Village, and the final section summarizes the conclusions and contributions of this article.

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