



# Characteristics and driving factors of rural livelihood transition in the east coastal region of China: A case study of suburban Shanghai



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## ABSTRACT

Based on data from 412 households, this study used the sustainable livelihoods approach to analyse changes in livelihood strategies and the relationship between those changes and rural household attitudes in an eastern coastal region of China. Focussing on household off-farm employment decisions and land transfer decisions, we classified the households into six types based on their livelihood strategies, namely, off-farm employment-oriented, balanced, off-farm, idle, professional, and conventional. The survey results indicate that two capital factors, age and education, and two mediating factors, wage and crop prices, are important influences of off-farm employment decisions, whereas factors such as policies and subsidies, machinery, activities organized by local agricultural cooperatives, and land rent substantially influence land transfer decisions. By analysing the characteristics, trends and driving factors of livelihood transitions, i.e., changes in rural household livelihood strategies, from 1993 to 2013, we explored the mechanisms of livelihood transitions. The results indicate that the proportion of conventional households decreased and the proportion of off-farm employment-oriented households and off-farm households increased. Agricultural production transformed from a system of scattered households (conventional and off-farm employment-oriented households) into broad-scale management households (professional and balanced households). These changes were the main characteristics of livelihood transitions under rapid industrialization combined with rapid urbanization in the Qingpu district. Rural livelihood transitions exhibited a stepped pattern, going through an initial stage, a self-organizing stage, and a government-led stage.

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## 1. Introduction

Since reform and opening-up was launched in 1978, China's traditional central planning economy has gradually transformed into a market economy (Long et al., 2012; Siciliano, 2012). In eastern coastal China, the processes of urbanization and industrialization have resulted in profound changes in the vast rural areas (Liu et al., 2011; Long and Woods, 2011). These changes affected agricultural restructuring, structural employment transformations, large-scale farming and technology innovations (Liu et al., 2014; Long and Woods, 2011; Siciliano, 2012). During these processes, agricultural production exhibited diversified operation modes and functions and shifted from quantity orientation to quality and benefits orientation (Liu, 2014; Long et al., 2010; Mullan et al., 2011).

Accompanied by this restructuring process that was driven by related policies, were tremendous livelihood strategy changes among rural households.

Recently, the changes in rural livelihoods in China have attracted the interest of academics involved in a variety of research, such as quantification and evaluation of livelihood assets (Chen et al., 2013a; Herrmann and Fox, 2014; Li et al., 2014), livelihood vulnerability and risk analysis (Fang, 2013; Guo and Zhou, 2013; Liao et al., 2014), influencing factors and diversification of livelihood strategies (Fang et al., 2014; Hogarth and Belcher, 2013; Hogarth et al., 2013; Huber et al., 2014; Lu and Lora-Wainwright, 2014; Tang et al., 2013), impacts of policies and institutions on livelihoods (Chen et al., 2013b; Galipeau et al., 2013; Groom and Palmer, 2012; Li et al., 2013; Zhen et al., 2014) and the interrelationships between livelihoods and the environment (Kemp et al., 2013; Nath and Inoue, 2014; Urgenson et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2013). Despite considerable progress, most insights into rural livelihood changes are based only on snapshots. However,

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livelihoods are usually dynamic (Ellis, 2000; Scoones, 2009), and as such, they involve transitions between different strategies (Mushongah and Scoones, 2012). Therefore, many variables involved in the process of rural livelihood transitions must be researched, including on- and off-farm employment, income sources, resources bases, financial capacity and social relationships of the households (Conway and Chambers, 1992; Scoones, 1998). To close this gap, Ulrich et al. (2012) presented a bi-temporal inter- and intra-household comparison, which covered 13 years, on the portfolio composition of assets in Kenya. Mushongah and Scoones (2012) used a combination of a bi-temporal household surveys, in-depth biographical interviews, and wealth rankings to examine livelihood changes in southern Zimbabwe over a 20-year period. Radel et al. (2010) comparatively assessed the agricultural livelihood transition and the accompanying land changes in Mexico's southern Yucatan region. These studies employed a comparative bi- or multi-temporal perspective to assess changes in livelihood assets or strategies of rural households. However, these comparative survey-based analyses provide limited insights into the continuously changing processes of livelihood transition. As livelihood transition is a continuous process, livelihood system changes are best investigated and analysed from a dynamic process perspective. However, the lack of long-term data at such detailed levels impedes the understanding of livelihood dynamics.

In light of recent calls for greater efforts to understand livelihood dynamics (Addison et al., 2009; Scoones, 2009), this paper contributes to the current livelihood literature with a continuous process analysis of the rural livelihood transition over 20 years. In this paper, a survey-based exploration of rural livelihood transition, a case study in the east coastal region of China, is presented. Because statistical data at the household level were not available, this study aims to explore livelihood changes using a household survey. We focus on the typical livelihood assets (labour and land) and the accompanying typical livelihood strategies (off-farm employment and land transfers), which are identified by the important role they play in China's rural livelihoods. By investigating and backtracking the current and former decisions that households made regarding labour and land, we develop a typology of livelihood strategies to define each of the household's current and former livelihood types, by which the footprint of each household's livelihood strategy and the continuously changing processes of livelihood transition can be restored. Accordingly, this paper contributes to the literature on the impact of personal perceptions and attitude factors on livelihood decisions. Household decision making is influenced by a combination of internal factors of the household and external factors from the environment and from the socio-economic context (Mattison and Norris, 2005; Valbuena et al., 2010). Internal factors include personal perceptions and attitudes towards making a certain decision (Yu et al., 2013). For example, even rural households with the same socio-economic characteristics may have different perceptions and attitudes toward their livelihoods, which may cause them to make different decisions. However, few studies have examined the empirical evidence of households' attitudes towards their livelihood decisions (Jongeneel et al., 2008; Meyfroidt, 2013). To close this gap, this study surveyed and analysed the household attitudes toward multiple factors that influence off-farm employment and land transfer decisions.

The objectives of this paper are (1) to identify and classify the main livelihood strategies of rural households in the face of socio-economic transitions in eastern coastal China, (2) to survey and analyse farmers' attitudes toward multiple factors that influence livelihood decisions regarding off-farm employment and land transfers and (3) to explore continuous livelihood changes of the households and how long-term shifts in livelihood strategies

emerge. Section 2 of this paper describes the study area and context, while Section 3 describes the concepts and methodology of the study. Section 4 then describes the results of the rural livelihood transition survey, presents statistical relationships between farmer attitudes and behaviours, and investigates evolutionary characteristics, trends and driving factors of rural livelihood transitions. Sections 5 and 6 discuss and conclude the main findings and indicate the potential for further application of the results.

## 2. Study area and context

### 2.1. Study area

The case study area is situated in Qingpu district, which is located in western Shanghai. Shanghai (31.1°N, 121.4°E), situated on an alluvial plain at the mouth of the Changjiang River (Fig. 1), is the largest city and the most economically prosperous region of China. As the economic, financial, trade and shipping centre on China's east coast, Shanghai occupies an area of approximately 6400 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of over 24 million (NBSC, 2012). In 2012, the land area of Shanghai comprised 0.06% of China and the population was less than 1.8%, but its gross domestic product (GDP) accounted for 3.8% of China's overall GDP (NBSC, 2012). Shanghai has experienced rapid economic development since the beginning of the 1990s. From 1990 to 2012, its resident population grew from 13.34 million to 23.80 million, the GDP increased from 781.66 billion RMB¥ to 20,181.72 billion RMB¥, and the shares of primary industry, secondary industry and tertiary industry in the GDP changed from 4.4%, 64.7%, and 30.9%–0.6%, 37.2%, and 62.2%, respectively (SSB, 2010). Rapid urbanization and industrialization have had profound influences on the development of the suburban rural areas. Although agriculture in Shanghai has an extremely low production value share, its grain output per unit, per capita net income of farmers and commodity rate of agricultural product all rank near the top in China. Its typical role in rural development has some reference value for the agricultural development of many regions in the context of rapid urbanization and industrialization.

Qingpu has a resident population of 1.16 million, of which 29.2% is registered in the rural area (SSB, 2010). In 2012, the shares of primary industry, secondary industry and tertiary industry in the GDP were 1.4%, 57.5%, and 41.1%, respectively (SSB, 2010). In the agricultural sector, plantation and aquaculture activities contribute to the production of the main fraction of the gross agricultural output value. The main cultivations are paddy, wheat, vegetables and fruit. Among these, vegetables, paddy, and wheat represent the most productive cultivations with respect to income generation. It is a typical zone with a long history of rice-farming. Dianshan Lake, located in this area, is the most important drinking water source for Shanghai. Located in the water source protection area of the Huangpu River, this region implemented strict surface water quality standards, which led to strict constraints for large polluting industries, such as heavy industry, livestock and poultry farming. As a pilot region for agricultural reform in China, agricultural production and operations in the Qingpu district involve a higher degree of industrialization and standardization. The phenomenon and problem that appeared in the livelihood transition process will have important significance for similar areas that are beginning to or are already experiencing livelihood transitions.

### 2.2. Policy and institutional context

To better understand the process of rural livelihood transition in Qingpu, we focused specific attention on China's socio-economic transition and the relevant policies and institutional context for the past two decades. Because China's market-oriented economic

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