



Spatio-temporal change of urban–rural equalized development patterns in China and its driving factors



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The urban–rural equalized development is not only significant theoretically, but also a strategic challenge facing the coordinated development of urban and rural China. In this paper we put forward an innovative theory of URED against the background of China's urban–rural transformation. The spatio-temporal pattern, its change and driving factors of urban–rural equalized development during 1996–2009 were analyzed using principal component analysis, the Markov chain model and exploratory spatial data analysis model based on the data for 31 Chinese provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities). It is found that during the study period URED exhibited an obvious tendency of “club homogenization” in China. However, since 2003 the homogenization of the URED for entire China has weakened. Moreover, URED showed a significant geographic characteristic of “polarization” during 1996–2003. Namely, the spatial units of a high URED level were concentrated in eastern China near the coast, and the spatial units of a low URED level were located mainly in central and western China. However, this spatial polarized structure of URED was destroyed since 2003, and the spatial disparity at the provincial level has decreased. Finally, it is concluded that policies and institutional structure, economic growth and urbanization were the main driving factors of the identified URED spatio-temporal pattern and its change in China. This study may serve as a scientific reference regarding decision-making in coordinating urban and rural development and in constructing the new countryside of China.

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1. Introduction

Urban and rural areas are the two entities that interact with and mutually influence each other in regional development. The maintenance of a reasonable equilibrium and interactive relationship between them is the fundamental prerequisite of accomplishing coordinated development of urban and rural areas (Liu et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2010a). In 1950, the Germany Seidel Foundation initiated the concept of urban–rural equalized development (URED), which referred to “Living in the rural areas does not mean a reduced quality of life”, or “inhabitants in rural and urban areas may have different life styles, but enjoy an equivalent standard of living” (Billaud et al., 1997; Neander and Schrader, 2000). Benefiting from the concept of URED and the implement of specific rural development program (e.g. land consolidation and

rural renovation), rural development in Germany experienced the phase from traditional agricultural to multi-functional and integrated development, which focused on environmental, landscapes and traditional cultural preservation and contributed to keeping people staying in rural areas (Magel, 2007). Through specific spatial planning and financing, this program has more or less transformed rural living in the village into a modern residential community, sped up the process of farmland standardization, industrialized agriculture and socialized services, and entitled villagers with the same right and opportunities on education, employment, social security and other fields as urban citizens. It can be seen that Germany has acted convincingly as a pathfinder in exploring ways of implementing URED in Europe. Germany's experience of URED could be absorbed, which complied with the trend of rural development in many Chinese villages, and gave inspiration to others.

From the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the initiation of Deng Xiaoping's reforms in 1978, economic policy in China followed a central planning model (Long and Michael, 2011). The development of agriculture and industry was unbalanced and a “dual track” structure was formalized in the national economy, with industrialization rapidly progressed at the expense

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of agriculture and the rural economy (Gustafsson and Li, 2002; Liu et al., 2010). Since the economic reforms of 1978, agriculture and the countryside have contributed greatly to, and have made substantial sacrifices for, the development of industries and cities in China (Long et al., 2011). This development strategy has caused a series of problems that obstruct China's social and economic development (Wan, 2001; Zhang et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2013a). The most notable issue is a shift in the economic balance and the widening of the prosperity gap between urban and rural areas, which is not only reflected in income difference, but also in non-agricultural employment, infrastructural construction, health insurance, social security and farmers' social status. In order to eliminate the gap between rural and urban areas, and achieve the goal of "urban–rural coordination development" (*chengxiang tongchou*), government should consider mapping out proper policies and strategies. The URED might serve as an important model for coordinated urban–rural development and modern village construction in China.

After more than 30 years of reform and opening up, China's rapid urbanization has caused a huge quantity of cultivated land lost to industrial workshops while rural labor is transformed into workers, resulting in large-scale rural hollowing and depopulation (Liu et al., 2010, 2013b; Sun et al., 2011). Currently, about 250 million rural labors in China shuttle between urban and rural areas. However, it is difficult for them to settle and work permanently. The issue stems from the underlying cause that the Chinese government attaches extreme importance to urban development and beautification without paying adequate attention to creating sufficient employment opportunities in villages and small towns so as to prevent rural people from moving to cities (Long et al., 2009; Leeuwen and van Dekkers, 2013). In 2011, China's urbanization rate has reached 51.3%. However, urban–rural development inequality and industrial-agricultural divergence have worsened due to the dual-track structure of socio-economic development (Zhai and Liu, 2009; Long et al., 2011). What is actually the outlet road for rural area development in China during the urban–rural transformation era—to rush blindly for rapid urbanization or to seek steady URED? This problem is not only a theoretical issue in urgent need of in-depth study in rural geography, but also a strategic challenge facing urban–rural coordinated development and construction of a modern countryside.

Against this backdrop, the fifth plenary session of the sixteenth central committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) put forward an important long-term development strategy to "build a new socialist countryside", in which China's collaborative construction of physical, spiritual, ecological, political and social civilization was expected to be shaped, and China's modernization was driven by "two engines" of urbanization and new countryside construction. Also proposed were the tactics of highlighting the socio-economic functions and value of rural China, promoting the inter- and intra-regional flow of production elements, cultivating self-innovative and specialized industries of township and villages, and elevating self-supporting capability, productivity and competitiveness of rural areas. In 2012, integration of urban–rural development is put forward as a major strategy of rural sustainable development in the eighteen central committee of CPC. In response to these policy propositions and requirements, the geographic study on the coordinated urban–rural development and construction of modern countryside should be strengthened.

In recent years, numerous studies have analyzed China's urban–rural development from the multidisciplinary perspectives of geography, economics and sociology. Previous studies mainly focused on the essential characteristics (Chen et al., 2010b), dynamic mechanism (Liu et al., 2008; Long et al., 2009),

construction modes (Li and Yang, 2011; Song et al., 2012), as well as planning and implementation (Zheng and Yu, 2011) of urban–rural development. However, few studies concentrated on China's urban–rural equalized development. So far researchers have merely focused on the qualitative analysis of the connotation (Stumpf, 1984, 1997; Stroessner, 1986; Ye and Bi, 2010), theory (Wilson and Wilson, 2001; Knickel and Peter, 2005; Wang, 2008a), mode (Jahnke, 1992; Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006; Li, 2007) and approaches (Schrader et al., 2004; Bruckmeier, 2000; Wang, 2008b) of URED. There is still a lack of quantitatively evaluating URED and revealing the spatio-temporal differentiation and driving mechanism of URED. Thus, no breakthrough has been achieved in the theory and practice of URED in China. This paper aims to put forward an innovative theory of urban–rural equalized development against the background of rural–urban transformation. It emphasizes the spatio-temporal pattern, dynamic process and driving forces of URED. This study may serve as a scientific reference regarding decision-making in coordinating urban and rural development and in constructing the new countryside of China.

2. Connotation and evaluation of URED

2.1. Connotation of URED

Currently, both rural development and urban development in China are experiencing a transition period. The traditional agricultural society is being transformed into a modern, industrial and urban society, and the economy is changing from a traditional planned economy to a modern market system (Liu, 2007; Long et al., 2011). This rural and urban transformation comprises urban–rural integrated development as a strategic process, and urban–rural equalized development (*chengxiang dengzhijhua*) as a strategic goal. According to the strategy of promoting the integration of urban–rural economic and social development, improving socialist new countryside construction plans, and accelerating the improvement of rural production and living conditions, URED should be put forward. The purpose of URED is to smoothly accomplish the distinctive equalization of urban–rural spatial location, economic investment, social services, ecological environment and quality of life.

- (1) The fundamental concept of URED implies that inhabitants in cities and villages may have different life styles, but can still enjoy an equivalent living standard. At present there is a huge disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of level of development in China. It dictates the complexity of urban and rural development characteristics and diversifies their development models. Rather than following the same development models as cities, URED highlights an innovative development model, in which villages are able to not only enjoy the same allocation of infrastructure, public services, social security, and basic rights as cities, but also preserve the traditional cultural landscape with idyllic characteristics (Liu, 2007; Gross et al., 2011). Instead of farmland being lost to factory workshops and villages converted to cities, URED focuses on eliminating urban–rural differences in pursuit of the rural style of production and life by popularizing mechanical farming and creating a favorable rural living environment and employment condition in rural areas (Stroessner, 1986).
- (2) URED refers to the collaborative process of urban–rural differential development and urban–rural complementary development, attaching more importance to equalizing urban–rural life quality and functions. URED involves four evolutive implications, evolving from building the concept of URED to

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