



# Impacts of concentrated rural resettlement policy on rural restructuring in upland areas: A case study of Qiantang Town in Chongqing, China



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## ABSTRACT

Concentrated rural resettlement (CRR) is a top-down approach widely adopted in upland rural China under its ‘increasing vs. decreasing balance’ policy. Rural households engaged in CRR have been resettled in new high-density rural settlements. However, it has been reported in limited studies to date and its effects on rural restructuring remain under-explored. Through in-depth field surveys conducted in Qiantang Town in Chongqing, this study investigates the rural restructuring trajectory following CRR implementation. The results indicate that CRR has led to marked spatial and social restructuring, which has strengthened the village-town hierarchical system and expanded the resettled residents’ social networks. However, economic restructuring was laggard and was accompanied by the persistent out-migration after CRR, which directly weakened community governance. Our findings reveal that the CRR examined herein, which delivers social-spatial restructuring, does offer an approach that deals with rural services/infrastructure challenges through local democratic structures. Despite the economic and administrative weaknesses, we argue that CRR is indispensable for rural restructuring under the present circumstances if it effectively engages with China’s Rural Revitalisation Strategy.

## 1. Introduction

As embedded features of the rural landscape, rural settlements are dependable indicators of the socioeconomic transition and demographic dynamics (Linard et al., 2012; Otterstrom, 2001; Smailes et al., 2002). With the proportion of global urban population increased from 33% in 1960 to 54% in 2016 (Liu and Li, 2017), population concentration towards the ever-growing cities has been the catalyst for the attendant rural decline and rural settlement evolution (Chen et al., 2014; Mcleman, 2011; Otterstrom and Shumway, 2003). This evolutionary process often is spontaneous, slow, and accompanied by socioeconomic transformations. Whereas, many countries have long employed land consolidation as an aggressive tool to intervene and solve various land-related problems and achieve sustainable rural development (Dijk, 2007; Haldrup, 2015; Huang et al., 2011; Long, 2014a; Pašakarnis and Maliene, 2010). In particular, rural settlement consolidation has prevailed in rapidly urbanising China as a pivotal instrument to break through the bottleneck of land resource constraints and create a rational rural-urban land-use pattern (Bai and Liu, 2014; Long, 2014a; Tang et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2005; Yan et al., 2015). In tandem with the settlement consolidation, concentrated rural

resettlement (CRR) is widely applied to relocate rural residents into relatively compact settlements in rural or peri-urban areas. This ‘concentration’ strategy is expected to exert considerable influences on the rural development efforts, although a holistic understanding has not yet been reached.

There exist underlying debates concerning the rhetoric of ‘concentration/density’ to deal with rural issues. Guided by the ‘growth pole’ or ‘central place’ theory which emphasise the socioeconomic benefits of spatial concentration, settlement concentration/density has been praised for its ability to cope with rural dispersion. Dispersed pattern of rural settlements frequently has been criticised as a major contributor to rural disadvantage and under-development (Higgs and White, 2000; Peng et al., 2014), which leads to land fragmentation, increased difficulty providing services and infrastructure, inaccessibility, low mobility, social isolation and underemployment in rural areas (Gkartzios and Scott, 2009; Mcgrath, 1998; Scott, 2007). In contrast, high-density rural settlement might, in certain contexts, act as a growth engine and stabilizer of urbanisation and economic growth by strengthening rural-urban relationships (Alaci, 2010; Daniels and Lapping, 1987). Moreover, in the consumption-oriented countryside, the attraction of rural amenities, including the upgraded housing and

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utilities, might help to capture urban spill-over and stimulate rural growth (Deller et al., 2001; Irwin and Bockstael, 2007; Mcgranahan, 1999; Shumway and Otterstrom, 2001). Nonetheless, numerous Western studies recently have pointed out that concentration might not be a panacea in rural planning. They argue that rural areas tend to be negative spaces with underlying uncertainties, relative inaccessibility, economic marginality and complex management contexts along the urban-rural divide (Gallent et al., 2006; Gallent and Shaw, 2007; Hoggart, 2005; Qviström, 2007). Given that rural areas depend on cities, constructing place-based competitiveness would be challenging (Markey et al., 2006).

As a planning instrument and policy intervention, rural settlement concentration has been deliberately introduced worldwide to rationalise settlement pattern and achieve relevant political and economic objectives. After Africa's partition, the pre-existing dispersed settlements were concentrated by various governments to strengthen rural security and administrative control (Kaloko, 1983). The French colonisation of Algeria was followed by the promotion of a centralised settlement structure that favoured the emergence of growth poles for rural industrialisation (Brebner, 1981). However, Lerise (2000) revealed that settlement concentration in rural Tanzania increased the number of land disputes and environmental degradations rather than land development when the extent of residential density deviated from local needs. In East Asia, according to a case study of a remote and declining village in Post-World War II Japan, CRR improved the quality of life, somewhat reversed the rural out-migration trend and revitalised community spirit. However, those outcomes largely depended on the extent of political will, administrative machinery and financial resources (Palmer, 1988).

In the West, rural concentration was achieved with Britain's Key Settlement Policy that steered growth towards designated centres while discouraging lower-tier settlements by strong Post-World War II land-use planning (Cloke, 1979; Gallent, 2009). Although that policy usually prevented sporadic rural development, it only partially achieved the desired increase in rural resource centres, and there was even less success in using the centralised resources to support small hinterland settlements (Cloke, 1982). When the counter-urbanisation pressures created by the middle-class population inflow resulted in rural gentrification (Gallent and Robinson, 2011), this policy generated social inequality and tensions as the powerful newcomers competed with the natives for rural resources (particularly housing) (Gallent et al., 2015). However, Sillince (1986) contended that this hierarchical strategy, under some circumstances, had produced overall growth in rural services and populations.

These implemented policies strike a chord with China's current enthusiasm for rural settlement consolidation and the subsequent CRR into the planned concentrated rural settlements (CRSs), albeit the different political settings. Driven by the ambitions to improve land-use efficiency and integrate rural-urban development, China's rural 'concentration' policy seems radical, and it is evolving into a powerful tide. The in-depth research on the implementations and outcomes of CRR in China will help to clarify the long-term debated issue concerning settlement concentration in rural areas in a global context.

China has significant spatial variations in rural socioeconomic characteristics relative to geographical locations, economies and cultures (Li et al., 2015b; Long, 2014a). The regional gap was exacerbated by the pre-existing economic disparities that generated the dramatic cross-regional migrations (Qin and Liao, 2016)<sup>1</sup>. At the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October of 2017, President Xi Jinping declared that the 'principal contradiction' of China had evolved into that 'between unbalanced and inadequate

development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life'. The ambitious Rural Revitalisation Strategy<sup>2</sup> was also enthusiastically put forward. These important decisions would be followed by counter-measures favouring China's declining hinterland. Therefore, this study investigates the impacts of CRR implementations on rural restructuring at the local level through a case study in Chongqing in southwest China, which is at the forefront of the rural policy reforms.

The key questions addressed by this study are: (1) How has CRR led to rural restructuring in the case study area? and (2) has CRR demonstrated effective local rural restructuring? Our findings are anticipated to yield insights into how governmental rural modernisation has reshaped the rural morphology of southwest China. This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 explains the policy context and local CRR implementations in China. The theoretical framework for rural restructuring triggered by CRR is described in Section 3. Through the case study of CRR practices at the town level in Chongqing, Section 4 examines the CRR implementation procedure, key responses from the relevant participants and the restructuring effects of CRR. Section 5 discusses the extent to which CRR triggered an effective rural restructuring trajectory, and it presents some conclusions regarding future CRR. Section 6 outlines the main conclusions and policy implications.

## 2. CRR initiatives in China: from policy context to local implementations

Shaped by rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, rural China has continuously suffered from notable degradations manifested as significant depopulation, increasing aging, land marginalisation, residential abandonment and low-quality infrastructure (Bai and Liu, 2014; Long et al., 2012). The obvious disparities between booming cities and lagging villages are rooted in the long-term urban-centred development paradigm<sup>3</sup>. The stubborn binary structure of the rural and urban sectors, embodied in the household registration (*hukou*) system and the dual-track land tenure system, provides an institutional shortcut for cities to exploit rural resources for national growth (Cai, 2016; Liu et al., 2015b; Long et al., 2010). Notably, the discriminatory *hukou* system dictates that millions of rural migrants are not eligible for the same social welfare as the permanent urban residents (Fig. 1). The dual-track policy creates a large floating population in dual residency statuses (Wang et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2016; Xu and Yu, 2015), which further leads to a novel increase in rural residential land despite the massive rural depopulation.

Increasing political attention has been given to these issues, and policy packages have been formulated to promote the new 'integrated urban-rural development' paradigm. Released by the central government in 2005, China's 'building a new socialist countryside' strategy expressed its ambitions to reconcile rural-urban disparities. The contemporary rampant urbanisation has occupied large areas of high-quality farmland, raising major concerns about food security which the central government sees as vital to political stability (Long, 2014a; Yep and Forrest, 2016). Thus, rigorous farmland protection has been introduced as an objective to maintain a total farmland area no smaller than 120 million ha. Since the State Council introduced 'balanced use and compensation' (*zhanbu pingheng*)<sup>4</sup> in 2004, the link between rural and urban land use was further developed through the 'increasing vs. decreasing balance' (*zengjian guagou*) policy to connect the increase of urban construction land with the decrease in rural construction land

<sup>2</sup> The target of the Rural Revitalisation Strategy is 'thriving businesses, pleasant living environments, social etiquette and civility, effective governance, and prosperity'.

<sup>3</sup> Government policies and private investments have long favoured cities, for which the latter have received more than 70% of China's total public and private investments in fixed assets since 1980 (Liu and Li, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> When one piece of farmland is converted to non-agricultural purposes, the loss must be matched by adding a new piece of farmland of the same size and quality elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> According to the State Statistical Bureau of China, 89.9% (40.17 million) of the rural farmers from China's central region moved to east coast areas in 2013, and 82.7% (28.40 million) moved from western to eastern areas (Wu et al., 2016).

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