



The dilemma of land expansion and governance in rural China: A comparative study based on three townships in Zhejiang Province

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ABSTRACT

Why do Chinese farmers continually utilize high-quality yet scarce cultivated land and extensively construct residences? Why is the Chinese government unable to control the continuous expansion of rural residential land after implementing strict economical and intensive land policies? To answer these questions, we launched a comparative study of three townships in Zhejiang Province. Based on a survey of 576 households and 72 rural government officials, this paper identified the determinants of rural house-building, explored different models of government intervention and provided recommendations for future government efforts. Results showed that (1) children, environment, investment, “mianzi”, and “feng shui” factors were the main driving forces that influence farmers to construct residential structures, although primary and secondary differences in the various townships existed; (2) three problems in the specific governance emerged: the lack of farmers’ unified action, failure to protect the rights of farmers, and the problem of meeting the funds demand of homestead replacement; (3) Actively exploring effective village planning, establishing linkages among stakeholders, effectively promoting farmers’ participation, creating a service-oriented government, and introducing a Public-Private Partnership mechanism may effectively address the problems related to rural residential expansion and governance. The results indicated a need to pay more attention to the motivations of rural house-building, the interests of stakeholders and the funding arrangements of the project in future government intervention.

1. Introduction

With the country’s rapid industrialization and urbanization, the decrease in rural population of China was 127.44 million from 2004 to 2013, and the proportion of the rural population had reduced from 58.24% to 46.27% (NBSC, 2014). However, the scale of rural residential land had increased from 18472.81 thousand hm² in 2009–18903.73 thousand hm² in 2013 according to the second national land use survey and the annual land use change data conducted by the Ministry of Land and Resources of China.¹ The growth scale was 430.92 thousand hm², which was more than the construction land area in Beijing in 2013. At the same time, China’s arable land area had decreased by 219.89 thousand hm². This figure indicates the rapid decline in the rural population (Qin and Liao, 2016) but a significant increase of rural residential land (Liu and Ravenscroft, 2017), which has had an adverse effect on the availability of cultivated land (Tang et al., 2012; Liang et al., 2015), food security (Yang and Li, 2000; Jiang et al., 2015), and ecological environment (Wang et al., 2016a; Liu et al., 2014). The phenomenon can be characterized: (1) a decrease in the rural

population mainly due to rural-urban migration (Siciliano, 2012), and (2) an increase in the number of rural residential land, because migrants build their houses in the rural areas to avoid the high cost of living in the urban areas (Tan and Li, 2013). Obviously, the facts are much more complicated (Long et al., 2007).

Why do Chinese farmers utilize high-quality yet scarce cultivated land continually to construct residential structures extensively (the rural house-building craze) (Sargeson, 2002; Long et al., 2007)? In general, changes in the natural environment (Zhou et al., 2013; Xu, 2004), urbanization and industrialization (Siciliano, 2012; Tan and Li, 2013; Dumreicher, 2008), economic and social transformation (Peng et al., 2013), and institutions (Zhong et al., 2011; Li and Wang, 2011; Li et al., 2013) are the driving forces in the land-use change in China’s rural residential land, especially property rights and markets form farmers’ attitudes towards land use (Ho, 2001; Sargeson, 2002). Numerous scholars have conducted field surveys in rural China, and have determined that the expected population growth and the need of farmers’ economic activities led to the “rural house-building craze” (Fang and Tian, 2016; Sargeson, 2002). However, these studies do not fully

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¹ In 2009, China completed the second national land use survey to identify the use of each land type, location, scope, area distribution, and so on, which are updated every year.

explain the motivations of rural households (James, 1995; Sargeson, 2002; Fang and Tian, 2016).

Meanwhile, since the launching of reforms and the opening-up in 1978, the Chinese government has continued to strengthen the management of rural homesteads, gradually forming a homestead management system of “one-household-one-house,² welfare distribution, free use, unpaid recovery, restricted circulation, no mortgage and no commercial exploitation” (Long, 2014; Tang et al., 2012). With this dynamic context, new and prominent contradictions and problems on the rights and efficiency of homesteads have emerged, and the expansion and governance of rural residential land has faced significant challenges (Tu et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2011; Tang et al., 2012). China’s central government strictly controls the total land area for construction at all levels of government through land-use planning and annual land-use planning within the framework of land management to protect cultivated land (Liu et al., 2015). And the Land Administration Law of China of 2004 requires that governments at all levels adopt measures to ensure that there is no reduction in the total amount of cropland within their jurisdictions (Tan and Li, 2013). In 2006, a policy on “linking the increase of land for urban construction with the reduction of land for rural construction”, known in Chinese as *zeng jian gua gou* (ZJGG), was enacted (Long et al., 2012). And In 2015, 30 counties (cities and districts) from the entire country were selected to participate in a closed experimental homestead system, rural land expropriation, and collective management of construction land into the market-oriented reform (Long and Liu, 2016). However, current policies have not achieved the expected results in the process of local government implementation (Zhong et al., 2014; Lichtenberg and Ding, 2008; Lin and Ho, 2005; Levine et al., 2008).

Why is the Chinese government unable to control the continuous expansion of rural residential land after implementing strict economical and intensive land policies (the governance dilemma) (Sargeson, 2002; Huang et al., 2013)? China’s grass-roots type of government is facing various challenges. On the one hand, the government must address the rural house-building craze and restrict the number of new homesteads. On the other hand, rural residential land consolidation and allocation under the ZJGG policy have been widely used to coordinate the numeric change of rural population and residential land (Li et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2016). The tension between the pressure to provide land for house-building and the imperative to preserve agricultural land is played out (Skinner et al., 2001). At the same time, local governments must protect the rights and interests of farmers (Tang et al., 2012; Sargeson, 2012, 2013) and balance their financial resources in managing rural residential land (Wang et al., 2016b), but becomes most acute at lower levels where, ironically, the capacity to cope may be most problematic (Skinner et al., 2001).

In fact, many studies have focused on the two “whys” mentioned above and discussed the effects of farm household or government behavior on rural residential land use. But various studies have failed to systematically summarize the reasons for the expansion of rural residential areas and enhance the effect of governance intervention, because many studies have ignored the interaction between farmers and the government, and this exposes a number of theoretical, methodological and practical difficulties (Long and Liu, 2016). To answer these questions, further research need to be done, and we can try to study the two “whys” in the same context. The emphases of these questions are the determinants of the rural house-building and the models of government intervention (Sargeson, 2002; Fang and Tian, 2016; Huang et al., 2013; Liang et al., 2015). The motivations of rural house-building are the core of the first “Why”, and provide a relatively easy entry point

² “One-household-one-house” is the prescribed number of homestead that rural villagers can own. According to the specific legal provisions in the land management law of China, which can be found in the first paragraph of Article 32, rural households can only have one homestead and the land area of a homestead shall not exceed provincial, autonomous regional, and municipal standards.

in the interaction between farmers and the government. Meanwhile, Government intervention can achieve better results only on the basis of respecting the motivations of farmers. And the different model of government intervention is a compromise and coordination of the motivations in a way. And the attitude of farmers to government intervention is related to the motivations. The recommendations for future government efforts also need to be adapted to farmers’ motivations. Of course, the effectiveness of government intervention is related to many factors, such as planning, funding arrangement, etc. Therefore, we must answer the second “Why” from a more holistic perspective, in order to provide better reference for other regions and countries.

Moreover, many methods such as econometrics and GIS may not be suitable for the further study of the interaction between farmers and the government, because some villages similar in their measurements have vastly different outcomes of the motivation of rural house-building and government intervention (Long et al., 2009; Sargeson, 2002; Fang and Tian, 2016). Considering the two “whys”, the comparative method we used rather than the other methods can help us understand the motivation of rural house-building and government intervention in the rural background of China.

Mainly farmers are interviewed in the current study, but in-depth interviews are also conducted with grassroots government staff. From May 2014 to February 2016, 576 households and 72 rural government officials from three townships in Ninghai County, Zhejiang Province were identified. By conducting a comparative study of the three townships, the paper analyzes the real motivations of rural house-building and governments’ attitude toward the house-building craze. Then we explore the different model of government intervention and provide recommendations for future government efforts.

2. Study area and data source

2.1. Study area

There is an obvious gradient of regional economic growth along the Yangtze River, which can be considered a miniature of regional disparity in China’s economic development (Long et al., 2007). Zhejiang Province is located in the southeast coast of Yangtze River Delta. The province is China’s most economically developed, but the province’s economic development level is unbalanced. After a long period of in-depth observation, three townships were determined in Ninghai County, Zhejiang Province: Qiangao, Shenjun, and Xidian. The townships have roughly the same distance from the center of the county, and their geographical locations are connected to each other (Fig. 1). Dialects, customs, and other cultural environments are similar, but a certain gap exists in terms of the natural environment, resource endowment, and economic development of the townships. What’s more, through the pre-survey we found that the three villages share the same land use policy in China, such as the policy of “one-household-one-house” and the ZJGG policy, which provide a good basis for comparison in the study. The study of rural house-building craze and governance dilemma in China is complicated in which the cultural factors like localism and tradition can’t be ignored. But these factors are not the universal answer in rural China and other countries (Siciliano, 2012; Dumreicher, 2008; Peng et al., 2013; Li et al., 2013). Choosing the three townships in the same socio-cultural background, the other factors would be well studied, and will contribute to the found of common rules of rural house-building craze and governance dilemma in China and provide reference for other countries which have similar problems with China.

The first town is Qiangao, which is located on the eastern side of the other two towns. Qiangao has a central hilly landform, and three sides face the sea. Qiangao has relied on its rich marine resources, and its economic activity began to develop rapidly in the mid-1980s. However, economic growth began to slow down after 2000 because of the depth of its port and other restrictions. Shenjun is located in the west and is

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