



Governing rural redevelopment and re-distributing land rights: The case of Tianjin

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ABSTRACT

The character of the rural society is blurred under China's rapid urbanization process, posing challenges to governance in rural areas. By investigating the implementation of a widely-adopted rural resettlement policy in Tianjin, China, this paper explores the heterogeneity of rural governance, the factors influencing the formation of governance modes, and the effect of governance types on the re-distribution of rural land rights. Based on data collected through extensive interviews and fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, three forms of governance mode were identified: the highly-centralized mode, the semi-centralized mode, and the shared network. The paper concludes that *de facto* governance modes, not the nominal project leadership, drove the resettlement projects, and that capability and structural factors had the strongest influence on the redistribution of rural land right in the urbanization process, followed by project scale and the intervention from higher levels of government, and capability of stakeholders is influenced by the local economic, social and political conditions.

1. Introduction

Despite the call for more attention to be given to rural governance over almost two decades (Goodwin, 1998), few of the challenges have been met. While government intervention in the rural areas was argued to be inadequate, a normative governing mode is difficult to achieve (Grindle, 2004). Given rapid urban expansion, some suggested to include rural development in city-region governance. Harrison and Heley (2015) advocated a comprehensive, consistent and systematic mega-region governing system. However, others argued that the unique characteristics of the rural community should be acknowledged and retained (Goodwin, 1998; Sturzaker and Shaw, 2015), and special attention be given to the specific rural driving forces behind rural governance (Hoggart, 1988). They suggested that rural governance research should focus more on the restructuring of the rural socio-economic context, the interactions among stakeholders and the growth of rural communities – such as the recent studies of LEAD+ programmes in Germany and other European countries (Böcher, 2008; Fałkowski, 2016). However, these exploratory studies are long on descriptive analysis, but short on establishing normative governing models.

The research on rural governance is in fact trapped in a confounding enigma of whether rural governance models should merge with urban development or only focus on the empirical experiences and

characteristics of rural communities, or to form a normative research model that can fit to varied situations. A host of further questions can be asked: for example, what needs to be done by the government, when it needs to be done, and how it should be done (Goodwin, 1998; Grindle, 2004). Governing China's rapid and varied rural growth is a case in point. The rural resettlement policy is widely implemented around the country. From 2005–2014, the National Development and Reform Committee designated 647 national pilot projects in 29 provinces around China. In addition, there were many more provincial and city level projects. Empirical studies have nonetheless testified that a normative governing mode for China's rural development was unrealistic (Howell, 2004; Lee and Zhu, 2006; Po, 2011), although generally rural development took place under a collective mode, and was influenced by pilot projects and grass-root experiences (Ho and Lin, 2003; Po, 2011). It was also found that Chinese rural governance differs from urban governance, since rural communities were more influential and more participating in the decision making process, and the social and cultural contexts varied (Brandt et al., 2004; Po, 2011; Ying, 2010).

For the past two decades, despite the strict hierarchical administrative structure, the governance of rural development in China turned out to be heterogeneous (Brandt et al., 2004; Tao et al., 2014; Wang, 1997), spanning highly centralized administration and quasi-autonomous self-governing (Davis and Henderson, 2003; Ding and Lichtenberg, 2011; Goodwin, 1998; Po, 2011). The rapidly emerging

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local practices have urged the Chinese central government to authorize dozens of city governments to develop and implement rural development schemes according to their local circumstances. When a city's project became successful, however, it might be publicized all around the country as the example to follow, without considering the local circumstances. Among the city projects, Tianjin's were the pioneers and were highly commended by the Ministry of Land and Resources in 2005, and listed as the first batch of national-level pilot projects.¹ Indeed other cities around China have transplanted Tianjin's experience to their rural areas.² Given their significance and influence, an in-depth investigation of Tianjin's resettlement projects is overdue for enhancing the understanding of the importance of rural governance on the well-being of rural communities under China's rapid urbanization process.

Thus, based on the case studies of Tianjin's rural resettlement projects which are pioneers of their kind, the object of this paper is to unveil and analyze the heterogeneity of Tianjin's rural governance modes under the urbanization process and the key factors determining the formation of governance modes, and their impacts on rural land right re-distribution. The purpose is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the importance of rural governance in rural land right re-distribution in China's rapid urbanization process.

This paper treats the varied development in rural areas as the products of the dynamic interactions among stakeholders in the urbanization context. By investigating the inter-stakeholder relations in addition to geographic locations and socio-economic factors, the research can better delve into local rural contexts to address individual characteristics. Network governance theory was adopted for investigating the power relationships among stakeholders as this concept puts priority on small-scale projects and pays attention to the self-governance mode formed organically by the actors themselves (Osborne, 2010; Provan and Kenis, 2008; Rhodes, 2007). As well, this theory is premised on networks being comprised of autonomous organizations that cannot be called legal entities (Provan and Kenis, 2008), fitting the actual situation of rural China. Empirically, this paper looks into the governance for implementing a national rural resettlement policy in Tianjin. To address its purpose, the paper initially presents Tianjin's rural resettlement policy, then applies the network governance framework to analyze the heterogeneity and attributes of the modes of governance among Tianjin's rural resettlement projects using data collected from fieldwork, dissecting the inter-dependence and power relationships among stakeholders in the decision making and implementation processes. It then probes into the capability and structural factors of rural communities that shaped the different governance modes before assessing the outcomes of the different governance modes, that is, the re-distributed land rights among the rural households. This paper concludes that the *de facto* governance modes, not the nominal project leadership, drove the resettlement projects, and that capability and structural factors had the strongest influence on the redistribution of rural land right in the process of urbanizing Tianjin's rural areas.

2. The Tianjin rural resettlement policy and research methodology

2.1. The resettlement policy

To meet the increasing demand for urbanization and urban expansion, the Tianjin municipal government introduced the rural resettlement policy in the early 2000s. The original proposal was to create developable land required for the construction of the Tianjin Airport Economic Zone, which is located between the city center and the

development zones. However, during the implementation process, the affected rural communities staged strong protests. In view of the heated conflicts between the rural communities and the local governments, the central government eventually halted the policy. Under pressure, the local governments revised the policy agenda to fulfil the rural community's demands. A revised policy was introduced in 2009 and specified that a key principles was to ensure benefits to the rural communities.

An important feature of the revised policy was that within the same rural administrative region, the increase in urban construction land should be matched by a similar reduction in rural construction land. Also, to conserve arable land, any decrease in arable land due to urban expansion is to be compensated by converting rural construction land into arable land and to do so by reducing rural residential areas. The government also announced six principles for policy implementation in order to ensure the protection of the benefits of the rural communities. The first principle was that the new areas built to resettle the rural communities should at least be comprised of residential compounds, commercial zones, and public open spaces. Second, residents of the affected rural houses shall be compensated with urban flats in the new residential compounds. Third, monetary compensation shall be provided to households which are the users of the land expropriated by the government. Fourth, the construction land in the affected villages shall be restored as arable land, and the Household Responsibility System (HRS)³ continues to be applicable. Fifth, the management of rural communities shall be improved by replacing the rural collective committees (RCC hereafter) with urban neighborhood management committees. Sixth, the land and related assets owned by rural collectives shall be assessed and compensated by the government, and the compensation shall be distributed to all members. Finally, the resettled rural people shall be given urban resident status, and be provided with public services similar to those of urban people, including basic living allowance, pension, health insurance, and education. There are four groups of stakeholders involved in the implementation process: local governments (district and town governments) as the project organizer, a development company as the developer of the resettlement areas known as small new towns, a rural collective committee as the representative of the entire affected rural community, and individual rural households. The policy and institutional contexts are important for understanding and assessing the re-distribution of land rights under different governance modes emerged from varied socio-economic contexts of the rural communities. An appropriate conceptual framework is equally important.

2.2. Network governance modes

The classification of governance modes is commonly based on the role of the state in society (Peters and Pierre, 1998; Pierre and Peters, 2000; Treib et al., 2007). From this perspective, governance can be generally categorized into three modes: hierarchical governance, co-governance, and self-governance (Kooiman et al., 2008). The roles of each stakeholder in the governing process are of critical concern. Also, the interaction among stakeholders and the rules formulated for governing the interactions are important (Kooiman, 2003). Different from the hierarchical mode, which underlines the steering and controlling of central government, the self-governance mode is characterized by the ability and capacity of social entities to provide the necessary means to develop and maintain their own identities, and thus shows a relatively high degree of socio-political autonomy (Kooiman, 2003). The co-

¹ Ministry of Land and Resources of China. 2005. [Guotuzifa 207] Opinions on regulating the construction of land for urban construction and linking with the reduction of rural construction land. Government Print. (【国土资发207号】关于规范城镇建设用地区减少挂钩试点工作的意见)

² From local news reports.

³ Household Responsibility System (HRS) mainly refers to the use rights of arable land by the rural people. Under HRS, individual households in a village were granted the right to use the farmland, which was allocated to them according to the number of family members, whereas the rural collective committee, as the village-based governing body, retained other rights associated with the ownership of the land, such as the orchard, grass land, water front, and so on.

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