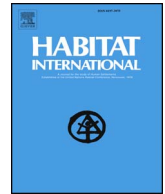




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Can community-based concentration revitalise the upland villages? A case comparison of two villages in Chongqing, Southwestern China

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ABSTRACT

Upland rural communities in Southwestern China are confronted with massive out-migration, notable land fragmentation and weak infrastructures under rapid urbanisation. Community-based concentration (CBC), characterised as traditional settlement consolidation and concentrated rural resettlement, has been widely implemented in rural Chongqing in recent years through the “increasing vs. decreasing balance” policy for increases in urban construction land with a reduction in rural construction land. However, limited research has been conducted to ascertain relevant villagers' responses to CBC practices and explore whether this initiative can revitalise the upland villages. Based on in-depth field investigations from a successful case (Dazhu Village) and a less successful case (Fengsi Village) in Chongqing, this study contextualizes and analyses the implementation process and outcomes of its local practices and villagers' attitudes and behaviours. The findings indicate that adaptabilities of CBC are embodied in effectively reducing dispersion of rural settlements, the continuance of local natural-social environment and appealing delivery of housing welfare. However, impressive limitations of CBC cover residents' low initiative towards residential concentration, livelihood insecurity felt by relocated households and the weakness of new community governance. Given China's new-type urbanisation scheme, we argue that CBC contributes to alleviating conflicts between rural recession and demand of people-oriented urbanisation by integrating housing modernisation, intensive land use, population agglomeration and accessibility to social services. Critically, CBC should be prudently developed not only following integrative planning based on local geographical and socio-economic conditions, but also measuring the dynamics of rural-urban interactions in urbanizing China.

1. Introduction

Both rural and urban development in China are in a transition period from a traditional agricultural society to a modern industrial and urban society (Long, Heilig, Li, & Zhang, 2007). Massive rural migrant workers have flooded into urban areas to earn a living, leaving many rural settlements unoccupied either seasonally or permanently (Bai, Shi, & Liu, 2014; Li, Liu, Long, & Cui, 2014). Due to the restrictions of the long-term rural-urban *hukou*¹ system, however, it is also notable that a large floating population maintains double residential status (X.-R. Wang, Hui, Choguill, & Jia, 2015; Wu, Zhang, Xu, & Li, 2016; H. Xu & Yu, 2015). The rapid depopulation in rural China also caused

labour forces ageing and further created a depression in agriculture under the household responsibility system. Consequently, cropland abandonment has emerged as a noticeable phenomenon in present rural China (Yan et al., 2016). A holistic degradation of rural functions, called rural hollowing, becomes a major problem facing China's agriculture and rural development (Long, Li, Liu, Woods, & Zou, 2012).

In 2005, China's central government adopted a comprehensive strategy for building a new countryside to improve rural living and producing conditions and for forming an orderly spatial pattern through rural restructuring (Long & Michael, 2011; Long, Liu, Li, & Chen, 2010). In keeping with this policy, a new popular wave of rural reconstruction has emerged in China over the past 10 years. Dominated

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¹ In China, many public services and welfare are provided by different levels of local government based on *hukou* system. If one rural resident keeps his (her) *hukou* in original place but moves to other place to live or work, he (she) will lose some sort of public services and welfare. For example, out of the village the free housing plot is not provided, out of the county the free compulsory education is not provided, and outside the province, the medical insurance cannot be reimbursed. Particularly, the migrants with rural *hukou* cannot enjoy the same social welfares as those who are of urban *hukou*. Most of the large cities have very strict restriction on the permanent migration of rural labours so as to economise fiscal expenditure (Fang et al., 2016; Shen, Feng, & Wong, 2006).

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by the central government, public investments in rural infrastructure have been increased across rural China. Specifically, large sums of money were poured into rural land consolidation in recent years (G. Jiang, Xinpan, Wenju, & Ruijuan, 2015; Long, 2014a), which has proven to be a specific and effective instrument in creating better conditions of life in rural areas and improving the sustainable use of resources and public facilities (Fang, Shi, & Niu, 2016; Miranda, Crecente, & Alvarez, 2006). However, rampant industrialisation and urbanisation has caused the large-scale occupation of high-quality arable land and raised major concerns in China about future food security (Long, 2014a). Hence, the Chinese central government has introduced strict farmland protection objectives, aiming at maintaining the total farmland area of no less than 1.8 billion mu^2 (120 million ha) up to the year of 2020. Nevertheless, these policies have had limited success in local implementation driven by the imperative of fiscal balance from selling farmland for non-agricultural development (Yep & Forrest, 2016). In response, the “increasing vs. decreasing balance” land use policy was introduced by the Ministry of Land and Resources of China in 2008, to seek to increases in urban construction land with a reduction in rural construction land (Long et al., 2012). This is particularly important for local government because of the central regulation concerning the quota for construction land.

The tightening of central government regulation over land utilisation and availability of linking urban and rural construction land usage attracted the interest of urban administrations governments and has been extensively adopted in some regions, for a saving in land use is achieved by concentrating rural households into the newly-built more space-saving apartment buildings (Yep & Forrest, 2016). This strategy seems a win-win solution to achieve greater parity between urban and rural sectors, fuelling China's urbanisation and rural revitalisation (J. Wang, Fang, C. L., & Wang, Z. B., 2011). China has witnessed enthusiastic and exploratory practices on rural concentrated resettlement in line with the “increasing vs. decreasing balance” policy. Various institutions have been created to explore legal mechanisms to exchange rural construction lands, including the Land Shareholding System in Nanhai, Guangdong Province (S. Jiang & Liu, 2003), the Homestead-for-Apartment Exchange System in Binhai, Tianjin (B. M. Cui, 2010; C. L. Yang, 2013), and the Transfer of Farmland Development Rights program and flat-for-flat compensation formula in Zhejiang Province (Chau & Zhang, 2011; Wang, Juer, & Tong, 2009). Also outstanding is the Chengdu city where the rural households benefit from newly created cooperatives and were relocated in urban apartments (Tang & Tan, 2013). The Farmland-Securities Exchange scheme in Chongqing, fuelled by the elaborated Land Coupon Programs,³ focuses on the provision of social insurance and ostensibly promotes the permanent urbanisation of rural residents.

In practice, these policies implemented in parallel were proven not a panacea, instead, posed a dilemma facing rapidly urbanizing China. For one thing, there are noticeable dissonances from the grassroots in the process of implementing these innovative policies concerning concentrated resettlement of rural residents. In many places, negative phenomena have been reported, such as regardless of farmers' interest and future livelihood, unrespecting the household willing, farmers' disliking urban life for absent social contacts (Bai et al., 2014; Y. Tian, Kong, Liu, & Wang, 2016), where the rhetoric of “New Socialist Countryside” tended to appear as a novel form-‘upstairsing’ resulting in the disorientation of concentrated resettlement. On the other hand, China's rampant urban sprawl appears as a land-centred urbanisation instantiated in not only the massive loss of arable land but also the emerging ‘ghost cities’ with an extremely high vacancy rate. These

‘Cities’ were driven by the local government’ craving for money from land sales and served as a shortcut for the local financial benefits (X.-R. Wang et al., 2015). Essentially, this dilemma was largely rooted in that the scale of growing urban area and urban population outpaced the provision of rights attached to the urban *hukou*, such as employment, education, medical services and pension insurance. As a countermeasure, the “New-type Urbanisation”⁴ proposed in China was designed for the transition from land-centred urbanisation to people-oriented urbanisation (M. Chen, Liu, & Lu, 2016; Long, 2014b), in which basic public services in cities and towns will be extended by local governments (X.-R. Wang et al., 2015). In line with this transition, rural resettlement approaches combining the land utilisation and villagers' spiritual satisfaction are necessary for both policy-makers and planners.

Concentrated settlement as a rural development approach has also been introduced around the world to reverse rural recession under urbanisation and cope with rural settlement dispersion. Many rural areas in Europe, North Americas, Australia, Japan and other developed countries and regions have experienced a rural recession characterised as rapid depopulation in rural areas, inefficient agricultural production, abandoned substandard housing driven by accelerated industrialisation and urbanisation, especially after the World War II (Bjørnå & Aarsæther, 2009; Cloke, 1979; Long & Michael, 2011; Mcgreevy, 2012; Nadin & Vincent, 2001; Stead, 2011). Moreover, the common rural settlement pattern in many regions, especially for developing countries, is dispersion (Muir & Winchester, 2001; Yan et al., 2016), which tends to be one of the major contributing factors to rural disadvantage and under-development (Higgs & White, 2000; Peng, Shen, Zhang, & Ochoa, 2014). It not only causes land fragmentation, decline in groundwater quality, increased difficulty in service delivery and infrastructure provision (Gkartzios & Scott, 2009; M. Scott, 2007), but also results in inaccessibility, low mobility, social isolation and underemployment in rural area (Higgs & White, 2000; Mcgrath, 1998). Reversely, concentrated rural settlements can act as growth-engines and stabilizers of urbanisation and economic growth by boosting the rural-urban linkage (Alaci, 2010; Daniels & Lapping, 1987). Particularly, the UK, the former Soviet Union, Japan, the USA, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand and other countries had carried out key settlement construction or settlement rationalisation projects, with ambitious schemes to reorganise the dispersed settlement pattern, modernise the infrastructures, diversify the economy and slow the depopulation in rural areas (Bjørnå & Aarsæther, 2009; Daniels & Lapping, 1987; Lerise, 2000; Mcgrath, 1998; Nadin & Vincent, 2001; Natsuda, Igusa, Wiboonpongse, & Thoburn, 2012; Palmer, 1988; Ploeg et al., 2000; Science, 2006). These practices with mixed outcomes showed that numerous factors, such as scientific planning, sufficient financial support, appropriate policies, and respecting the willingness of farmers under the certain socio-economic context, are critical to the success of concentrated rural settlement.

Some studies have been conducted on the local response to rural resettlement practices of various models and associated recommendations are provided under specific context around China. Focusing on the resettlement into the township in northern China, Q. Wang, Zhang, and Cheong (2014) find factors that mattered were these residents' main occupation and age, and older group registered higher resistance rooted in the psychological hurdle. In a case study of Huantai county in Shandong province, Long, et al. (2012) argue that the implementation

⁴In March 2014, the Chinese government released the “National New-type Urbanisation Plan (2014–2020)”, which set targets for China's urban population fraction to rise by 1% a year to reach 60% by 2020. This strategy was to divert the rural population flow to newly developed towns and villages in the rural areas to deter migration into major cities. Chinese cities, especially large cities, face various social and environmental problems from further growth and have limited capacities to absorb such a large number of rural labours. Correspondingly, China has also begun to relax the *Hukou* system, especially in smaller cities, allowing and encouraging rural households to settle in these cities.

² 1 mu = 1/15 ha.

³ The programs follow the “Increasing vs. Decreasing Balance” policy and further turns the reclaimed rural residential land into a kind of financial certificate which can be fully tradable in the market and thus promotes the exchange of rural for urban space and significantly accelerates the relocation process (Yep & Forrest, 2016).

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