



An investigation of non-local-governed urban villages in China from the perspective of the administrative system



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ABSTRACT

Along with the large-scale urbanisation process in China, the issue of ‘non-local-governed urban villages’ (NLGUV) arises within government. NLGUVs are suffering from overlapping administration, mismatched responsibilities and rights and unclear lines of authority. This fact not only violates the basic legal principle of administrative division, but also creates serious management problems and goes against the principal of co-ordinated development of urban and rural areas. Based on a questionnaire survey and interviews of urban villages in Beijing, this paper aims to answer two questions: first, what are the institutional barriers of the NLGUVs, and second, how they have hampered the rural-to-urban transition of those urban villages and urban-rural integration in the urban fringe areas. It is found that, while having administrative problems in common, the NLGUVs vary significantly in terms of demo-geographic, socio-economic, and management characteristics, so it is argued that solutions to the administrative management problems of the NLGUVs should be different. Upon analyses of the 155 NLGUVs distributed over 32 sub-districts and seven districts in Beijing, they are divided into four groups: lagging-behind urban villages, transformed urban villages, problematic urban villages and enclave urban villages. On this ground, urban policies including abuse of the setting criteria of sub-districts, and problems with the resettlement policy of urban villages and current land acquisition policies are identified as the main causes for the ‘production’ of the NLGUVs. The findings shed lights on the restructure of administrative system for existing urban villages and reform of urban policies.

1. Introduction

In the Chinese administration system, a sub-district (Chinese: *jiedao*) is the local governance unit in urban areas, and a township plays the same role in rural areas. Along with the rapid urbanisation process and the sprawl of urban land, new sub-districts are set up in urban fringe areas. As a result, a large number of villages in these areas, which were once rural, have become urban villages. In practice, many urban villages have existed for years prior to being incorporated into the jurisdiction of urban areas, because the social and institutional transition towards ‘real’ urban areas takes a much longer time than merely a nominal shift of space. In view of this, some people have argued that inter-growth policies should be adopted to allow for the long existence of urban villages (Yan & Wei, 2004).

With the advantages of convenient locations and low rents and living costs, urban villages have attracted a large number of migrant workers and low-end industries in large cities. Migrants who come to large cities often see urban villages as an easy route to move in. In Beijing, for instance, it was estimated that the ratio of the registered population to migrants in urban villages is 1:8 (Zhao, 2017). In Guangzhou, urban villages that were scheduled to be demolished and redeveloped from 2014 to 2016 amounted to more than 300, accommodating 982,500 villagers and five million migrants (Du, 2014). The concentration of people and low-end industries, however, has led to a variety of problems such as informal governance, overloaded migrants, bad living environments due to overcrowded and poor infrastructures, and crime (Liu, He, Wu, & Webster, 2010; Wang, Wang, & Wu, 2009; Wu, Zhang, & Webster, 2013; Zheng, Long, Fan, & Gu, 2009).

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Therefore, urban villages are commonly regarded as problem areas, not only posing a threat to public security but also hindering urbanisation and regional development (Zhang, 2002).

Among urban villages, a new type, called the ‘non-local-governed urban village’ (NLGUV) presents more problems than the others. As suggested by its name, the administrative authority over such urban villages is not held by the urban government. Instead, it is retained by the former rural township. Due to the separation of the administrative lines of authority, such urban villages are trapped by overlapping administrative authorities that maintain ambiguous responsibilities.

So far, previous studies have made great efforts to create a thorough awareness of urban villages (Hao, Geertman, Hooimeijer, & Sliuzas, 2013; Leaf, 2002; Li, Lin, Li, & Wu, 2014), but the issue of the NLGUV and its characteristics have been neglected. In abundant literature about Chinese urban villages, none has dealt with this specific type. In particular, little is known about problems with regard to its administration and institutional system.

We argue that the administration system is a critical factor to be considered in solving environmental problems, enhancing management and delivering public services in NLGUVs, and it is significant to discuss this issue in order to promote the transition of the passively ‘urbanised’ urban villages towards ‘real’ urban areas as well as the integrated development of urban and rural areas. So far, the administration system issue has not raised sufficient concern from the academic world and little attention has been paid to the phenomenon of NLGUVs. In the following, we present the story of NLGUVs in Beijing. Drawing data from an intensive field survey and questionnaire analysis, this paper aims to answer two questions: first, what are the institutional barriers of the NLGUVs, and second, how they have hampered the rural-to-urban transition of those urban villages and urban-rural integration in the urban fringe areas. We intend to explore the relationship between the state-of-the-art organisation of NLGUVs and urbanisation policies, and find ways to accelerate the transition towards a localised governance through the clarification of administrative responsibilities. This may not only offer insights for urbanisation policies in China, but also provide a position on the institutional reform of other fast-expanding developing countries.

2. Chinese governance structure and urban villages

2.1. Urban and rural governance structure

For a better understanding of the NLGUV in Chinese cities, it is first necessary to understand the Chinese governance structure. There are four levels of administrative organisations: in urban areas, they are municipality, district, sub-district and neighbourhood committee; and in rural areas, they are municipality, county, township and village committee (Lah, Jing, & Cheung, 2016). Under the so-called ‘urban–rural binary structure’ in China, there are distinct functional differences between sub-districts and townships, and between neighbourhoods and villages.

The sub-district is a devolved agency of district government (the lowest level of local government), which is responsible for social security, public services and population registration within its area of jurisdiction. The sub-district has no economic function and its financial budget is provided by the superior district government. On the other hand, the township is the basic level of government in rural areas and its function lies more in administration than the provision of public services. Accordingly, besides responsibilities similar to sub-districts, the main function of township government is to promote rural economic and social development. Its budget mainly comes from taxation, township-owned enterprises and land rent (Li, 2003) (Table 1).

Officially, neighbourhood and village committees are both self-governing organisations. Although they both serve as appendages of sub-districts and townships, respectively (James, 1999), there are also differences in their functions. Neighbourhood committees focus on

community services and public security, and they are regarded as a bridge between community residents and local government. On the other hand, village committees take charge of all the administrative functions in terms of political, economic and public affairs. One of the most important functions of the village committee, which sets it apart from the neighbourhood community, is the management of rural collective property, including rural land, collective-owned enterprises and funds.

2.2. Urban villages and NLGUVs

The existence of urban villages, which are located in urban areas but maintain rural-like institutional systems and collective property ownership (Cai, 2003), is a special phenomenon under the dual governance structure and persistent urban–rural differences in China (Song, Zenou, & Ding, 2008). This phenomenon represents a rapid rural–urban transition of social and economic development. The transformed agricultural land use and remaining rural settlements have created ‘island’ urban villages within cities (He, Liu, Webster, & Wu, 2009). Spatially they are urban, but actually they are excluded from urban governance. This has triggered various environmental and social problems such as incompatible land use, poor housing conditions, deficiencies in infrastructure, intensified social disorder and the deterioration of environments (Zhang, Zhao, & Tian, 2003). The incomplete transition of housing property rights has also made the urban village a ‘regulation-blank area’ free from urban planning regulations (Zhou, 2004). The concentration of migrants has exacerbated the problem, making many urban villages poor communities within cities (Liu & Wu, 2006).

The NLGUV, as a special type of urban village, has its conceptual basis in the conventional urban–rural binary administrative division that urban governments take charge of the urban residents and townships administer the rural residents. In China, a strict registration system (the *Huko* system), which separates the urban and rural populations, facilitates the operation of such an administrative division (Wu & Treiman, 2004). In the case of NLGUVs, as they are no longer located in the area of jurisdiction of rural townships, they should switch to the urban governance system. However, for various reasons, this is difficult to achieve immediately. Therefore, administrative authority over them is not passed to sub-districts, but still retained by the townships to which the villages formerly belonged. Because of the delay in institutional transformation, the urban–rural binary administration of ‘citizens belong to sub-districts and villagers to townships’ has continued.

The dilemma of the NLGUV reflects the conflict of interests in the course of urbanisation, and practice has proved that the administrative contradiction can hardly be solved in a short time. Nonetheless, the ‘citizenisation’ process of rural people and the integration of urban and rural management have been severely hindered by long-standing NLGUVs.

3. Method and data

Beijing is leading the high-speed urbanisation process in China, especially following the 2008 Olympic Games. From 2000 to 2015, the proportion of urban inhabitants increased from 77.5% to 86.2%. Concurrently, the urbanised area of Beijing was significantly enlarged by the influx of migrants and urban expansion. From the 1990s to 2015, the number of rural villages decreased by 3899. Correspondingly, the number of urban villages increased, and they present a widespread distribution in the districts of the central area and in suburban districts. These urban villages are commonly deemed to be problematic areas due to massive migrant concentration, which clearly exceeds the capacity of the infrastructure and public services, bringing severe environmental and social problems (Feng, 2010). In recent years, special policies for some typical urban villages have been launched to deal with the environmental problems. Benefiting from tremendous government financial support, they have mostly achieved their goal of renovation and

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