



The key causes of urban-rural conflict in China



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ABSTRACT

In recent years, China has undergone an extremely rapid phase of urbanization, which has caused many acute problems between urban and rural areas. This paper identifies three categories of social, economic and environmental conflict, and investigates their significance according to the views of two different populations using a questionnaire survey and interviews. Using fuzzy set theory, the key causes of urban-rural conflict related to urbanization in China are identified. The differences in urban and rural people's perceptions of these key factors are discussed and the factors underlying these perceptions are analyzed.

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1. Introduction

Urbanization is a double-edged sword, in that it can bring tremendous opportunities for development while at the same time causing problems such as increased ecological degradation, traffic congestion and urban sprawl. Globally, the degree of urbanization has increased 21% in the past 60 years. More than 50% of the world's population now lives in urban areas and this figure is expected to reach 60% by 2030 (United Nations, 2010). The level of urbanization in China has rapidly increased since the introduction of the reform and opening up policies, with the sixth census showing that 49.68% of the population now lives in urban areas. It has taken China only 30 years to catch up with the hundreds of years of urbanization in developed countries. However, the dramatic compression of the process of urbanization has meant that consequent problems have tended to be more acute.

As a result of the deeply rooted urban-rural structure in China, there are significant differences between urban and rural areas in terms of land property rights and social security. For example, as urbanization continues to lag behind the rate of industrialization in China, the growing urban population is outpacing the level of

urbanization in rural areas. This means that rural areas lack an effective driving force for development and millions of farmers are unable to enjoy the benefits of urbanization. The longstanding development pattern whereby "rural supports urban while urban dominates rural" has resulted in an extreme lack of coordination in economic development, social justice and resource allocation between the two areas. This urban-rural gap is the key constraint on social harmony and sustainable development in China.

A literature review identified 21 factors that influence urban-rural conflict in urbanization, grouped into three categories: property conflict, resource conflict and development conflict. A questionnaire survey and interviews were then carried out to investigate urban and rural people's views of these 21 factors. The data were processed and modeled using statistical methods and fuzzy set theory to identify the key causes of urban-rural conflict in China. The differences between the urban and rural respondents' views of the key factors were further compared and analyzed in relation to the influence of city life and individual income. The results of these analyses are presented in this paper and the underlying causes of the key factors are discussed.

2. Literature review

Urbanization is a historical process through which traditional rural societies dominated by agriculture are transformed into modern societies dominated by secondary and tertiary industries.

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However, due to the migration of the rural population and the expansion of urban land, this process often leads to urban-rural contradictions and even conflict in relation to politics, resources, the environment and culture. As most Western countries have been undergoing urbanization for more than a hundred years, the urban-rural conflict has mostly been resolved. However, as China's urbanization has been extremely temporally and spatially compressed, the level of urban-rural conflict has been intensified.

Research on the process of urbanization has long focused on political conflict. Friedman (1961) pointed out that inequalities clearly existed between cities' and villages' election and voting behavior related to the U.S. House of Representatives, and that cities and villages should be considered as independent subjects when examining the political significance of urbanization. In China, the political inequality between cities and villages reappears in the unequal allocation of seats in the National People's Congress (NPC) through the household registration system. Statistical data show that rural NPC representatives represent around four times as many citizens as urban NPC representatives, which has resulted in Chinese farmers' weak position in the NPC. Furthermore, people who are registered in the country but live in the city lack social security in housing, education and health care.

Urbanization tends to lead to resource conflict, especially in countries such as China with large populations but limited land. The typical traits of urbanization are the physical expansion of urban areas and the transformation of farmland into construction land (Wu, Zhang, & Shen, 2011). However, farmland is a basic factor of production that provides the essential requirements of the peasantry. If peasants lose their land and do not receive job training to work in the secondary and tertiary industries, landless peasants will present a tough social problem that is likely to sow the seeds of urban-rural conflict (Hui & Bao, 2013). The change in land property rights that accompanies the change in land use is a key point of potential urban-rural conflict. In the process of land acquisition, peasants lose both their land property rights and their land development rights.

Developed countries face environmental conflicts relating to urbanization. On the whole, cities are a cause of point-source pollution from newly constructed chemical factories and other buildings, while rural areas are a cause of non-point source pollution from factors such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, agricultural waste, straw combustion, animal husbandry and soil and water erosion (Li, Zhu, Gu, & Zhu, 2010). Aquaculture, for example, is usually stocked in rural ponds or rivers but distributed in cities, which results in different pollution trends. Non-point source pollution is currently considered to be the main pollution source of water eutrophication (as demonstrated by the cyanobacteria outbreak in Lake Taihu in 2007) and an important factor limiting sustainable economic development (Hu, Xia, Hu, Lin, & Chen, 2011). The fact that all heavily polluting factories are located in semi-urban areas further increases the environmental conflict between urban and rural areas.

The process of urbanization causes increasing collisions between tradition and modernity as well as country and city, and, in a sense, the most fundamental form of urban-rural conflict relates to differences in culture. In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Huntington (1996) wrote that in the newly built world, the most widespread, important and dangerous form of conflict is neither the conflict between rich and poor nor that between social classes, but the conflict between different cultural entities. China's rapid urbanization has resulted in large numbers of peasants who live in cities but still have the mentality of farmers, and who behave differently from their urban counterparts (Zhang, 2002). Situations such as this intensify the potential for political, resource, environmental and cultural conflict.

Urban-rural conflict in relation to politics, resources, the

environment and culture is always interwoven with other problems, thereby creating an intricate and complex situation. According to Campbell's (1996) triangular model of sustainable urbanization, the most important factor is maintaining the balance between economic growth, social equity and environmental protection. However, each of these three factors is a source of conflict; for instance, the contradiction between economic growth and social equity is manifested in property conflicts, while the contradiction between economic growth and environmental protection is manifested in resource conflicts. This means that economic development consumes large amounts of resources, resulting in inevitable environmental destruction and the exhaustion of resources. Moreover, the contradiction between social equity and environmental protection results in development conflict: although people of different social classes want to improve their lives, a lack of environmental awareness and modern technology means that urbanization may lead to serious environmental destruction. With the emphasis on political stability (Fig. 1), these three conflictual relationships are a major source of urban-rural conflict in China (Yu, Wu, & Zheng, 2014).

3. Methodology

Content analysis involves combing and mining the literature, and is widely used in social science research. In the first stage of this study, content analysis was used to identify possible causes of urban-rural conflict in the literature. The 21 factors obtained cover three areas of conflict: property conflict, resource conflict and development conflict.

A questionnaire survey was used to investigate urban and rural residents' views of the 21 factors. To collect more detailed information, interviews were conducted with representative groups, such as government and corporate employees and urban and rural residents.

The data were processed and modeled using statistical methods and fuzzy set theory to quantitatively compare the views of the two populations in relation to the key causes of urban-rural conflict in China. Finally, the differences between urban and rural respondents' views of the key factors and their fundamental causes are discussed.

3.1. Technology roadmap

The technology roadmap of this study is shown in Fig. 2. First, the questionnaire respondents were divided into two groups based on whether they lived in urban or rural areas (hereinafter referred to as urban people and rural people). Their respective opinions on 21 potential causes of urban-rural conflict were then investigated

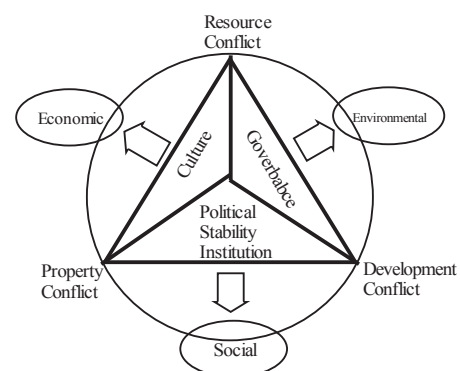


Fig. 1. A conical analysis framework for urban-rural conflicts in China (Yu et al., 2014).

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