



The evolving concepts of land administration in China: Cultivated land protection perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a holistic method by integrating three concepts (land resources management, assets supervision and political governance for sustainability) for investigation of land administration in China, taking into consideration of cultivated land protection for a testimony with econometric method. Theoretically, in this self-organizing integrated method, land resources management focuses on the productivity of land; land assets supervision centralizes on the realization of land usufruct rights in land transference; land political governance for sustainability concentrates on harmonious linkage of economic efficiency, social stability and environmental safety of land use. Their interrelations are complex. Methodologically, the results indicate that the theoretical model is feasible to explain variations of cultivated land protection with these three concepts. Cultivated land decreases with increasing land value increment multiples, and is positive with political governance concept, but not in a linear fashion. Finally the results suggest that roles of government in land administration need to be changed and strengthened, supporting complete compensation for land expropriation and modification to policies of cultivated land.

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Introduction

Land administration and its components, are essential ingredients of national infrastructures (UN-ECE, 1996). Land ownership, land values and land use are key attributes in regulating land property development, gathering revenues and resolving conflicts (Dale and McLaughlin, 1999). In China, scholars hold ideas that land administration is the process of organization, coordination, supervision and management on land resources, land use, land property rights and land profit with political instruments for sake of whole society (Qu et al., 1995; Qu, 2003; Zhu, 2000; Wang and Li, 2003). Other studies on land administration (Williamson, 2001; Williamson and Ting, 2001; Williamson and Wallace, 2006), cadastral titles and land market (Krusekopf, 2002; Rajabifard et al., 2007; Cashin and McGrath, 2006), urban land administration (Cheng et al., 2006), and land sustainable conservation (Törhönen, 2004; Yang, 2004), altogether make these factors—land resources management, land assets supervision and land political governance for sustainability constitute foundation of land administration.

China has gotten progresses in economic and social reform since 1978. In terms of land use perspective, reform gradually switches

from previous land administration with characteristics of free use (no land prices, taxes or fees), permanent possession (no expiration) and static land use (prohibition of sale, lease, mortgage, exchange and donation) (Zhu, 2002) to current land administration with re-generation of land markets, land taxes and land fees, separation of land usufruct rights from land property rights, upgrade of land productivity and prosperity of real estate (Ding, 2003). But drawbacks also emerge: massive transference from agricultural land (especially cultivated land) to constructive land; degradation of land productivity associated with rapid urban sprawl and cultivated land abandonment (Yang, 2004); hidden and invisible land market (i.e. appropriated land with low prices enters land market and hence hampers normal land transference; this action is prohibited by government but is prevalent in many developed areas in China.) hampering land equality (Zhu, 2002; Ding, 2003); social conflicts between farmers and urban government motivated by insufficient social welfare reimbursement, land expropriation, and conflicts of land reclaims and land ecological protection especially in the western part of China (Yang, 2004).

The deficiency in land administration is probably caused by the mismatch between desirable institutional conditions and poor organization in land administration system (van der Molen, 2002). For example, incomplete definition of land tenure will make land registration difficult, and corrupted administrators will probably show their biases in policy-making. Another reason is lacking a

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holistic view on land use process because of its complexity (Wu, 1991). For example, some farmers are inclined to maximize land productivities because of the 30-year valid period based on household contract responsibility system (HCRS); ruthless land reclaim in ecological hazardous areas may induce economy-environmental malicious cycles. Prospects of sustainability, economy, society and biophysical environment cannot be analyzed separately (O'Connor, 2006). China has been experiencing accomplishments and drawbacks in reform for almost three decades, and it is inevitable to make some blunders because of eagerness, hesitation or lack of experiences.

Cultivated land protection is one of the most important aspects in land administration (Ding, 2003). Studies of cultivated land protection have been linked to natural conversation and environment (Meyer-Aurich et al., 1998), impact of policy implementation (Skinner et al., 2001; van Meijl et al., 2006), and economic evaluation of externalities (Chang and Ying, 2005). The integrated effects of population stress, economic development and national food self-guarantee, and scarcity of land resources have promoted increasing demands for cultivated land (Yang, 2004). However, the actual protection is somewhat frustrating in China: the area of cultivated land is diminished from 129.64 million hectares in 1998 down to 123.40 million hectares in 2003 (Ministry of Land and Resources P.R.C. (MLRC), 2004), and the effectiveness of dynamic balance of cultivated land is doubtable (Yang and Li, 2000). In this study, with theoretical land administration concepts, econometric analysis on cultivated land protection is a testimony for how factors affect cultivated land protection in order to investigate feasibility of theoretical model.

Starting from these considerations, the goal of this study is to analyze current land administration empirically with a holistic approach: integration of land resources management, land assets supervision and land political governance for sustainability. We also take cultivated land protection into account for a testimony. In pursuit of this objective, the study will begin with an integrated theoretical framework based on three land administration concepts with characteristics of function and mechanisms in “Theoretical approach” section. More detailed analyses on three concepts will be demonstrated by the interrelations and concentrations in “Concepts of land administration system” section. In order to test this theoretical model, the “Econometric specification” and “Econometric methodology and results” sections introduce econometric analysis of fixed effect using panel data based on 31 provinces of China in 1998–2002, and review the results of how it correlates with key variables about land value increment, natural resources protection and political-related subsidies, especially their interplay effects. In “Discussion” section, three major problems of cultivated land protection: land compensation and inequality in expropriation, efficiency in governmental investment on agriculture and some land policies, as well as changing roles of government. The final section concludes with some suggestions and limitations.

Theoretical approach

Structure of theoretical model

This study constructs a theoretical model (Fig. 1) to highlight the interrelations of key factors in land administration—land resources management, land assets supervision and land political governance for sustainability, and simplify the complexity of land use process. This theoretical model investigates evolving land use process after the foundation of P.R. China in 1949.

This theoretical model is based on three land use sub-systems, corresponding to three major types of land use—agricultural land,

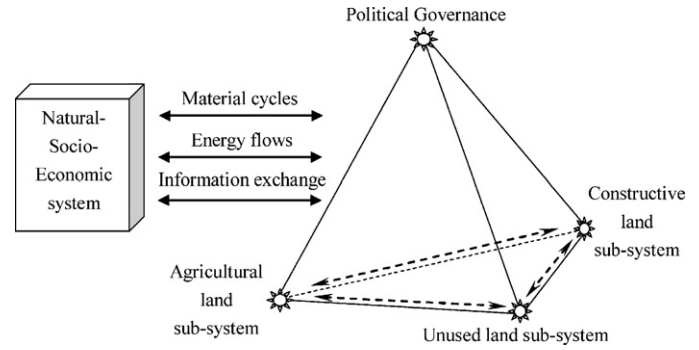


Fig. 1. Structure of theoretical model of land administration in China.

constructive land and unused land (China’s first land use classification was conducted in 1984, and in 2001 new land use classification was categorized into three major types of land use: agricultural land, constructive land and unused land), each of them has their own sub-systems in contrast with subcategories in each type of land use as well. The model is involved in natural socioeconomic system by means of material flows, energy flows and information exchange. For the sake of analysis on land use process, this theoretical model comparatively concentrates on three sub-systems and their interrelations.

The theoretical model may, in this regard, be construed as the articulation of three complementary aspects, depicting complex land administration.

The first aspect is the base-points on bottom surface with focuses on land resources within each sub-system. This means that land use process takes priority to improve production by optimal allocation as essential material foundation in this model. The second aspect is the three lines on bottom surface with focuses on interrelations of land transferences between each two sub-systems. Transference from agricultural land to constructive land and the inversed direction are two important processes. The third aspect is conducted by linking three side surfaces which indicate controlling of transference among sub-systems. Only considering two aspects mentioned above, land use process often provides biases. The third aspect should be executed by government with contact of natural socioeconomic system, constructing holistic integration for material cycles, energy flows and information exchange. In “Concepts of land administration system” section more detailed information will be provided.

Function of theoretical model

Based on previous work (Stuedler et al., 2004), Fig. 2 shows the function of organizational levels, features and responsibilities of theoretical model. At operational level, land use units, farmers for agricultural land and institutions or enterprises for constructive

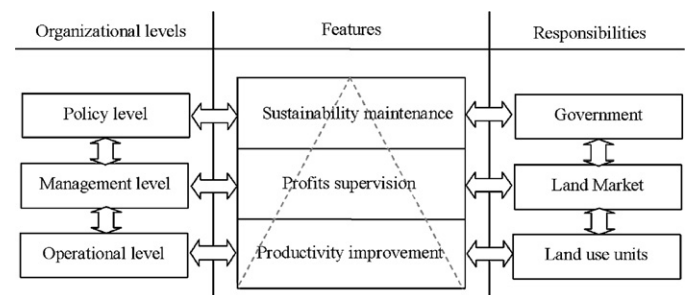


Fig. 2. Organizational levels, features and responsibilities in theoretical model.

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