

Multipolar Rural Restructuring in China: Policy accommodation and local initiatives in the case of Anhui Province

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Abstract:

This dissertation explores how national policies and local initiatives interact and jointly restructure rural China. In Chapter 1, I critically assess the prevailing developmentalism found in current studies on rural restructuring in China. Adopting a critical perspective towards rural modernization and development, I draw on Arturo Escobar's *Encountering Development* and James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* and *Weapons of the Weak*. These theoretical foundations guide my attention to the pivotal role of local initiatives of peasants in the process of rural restructuring. This dissertation aims to illustrate the intricate interweaving of national policies and local initiatives across three dimensions: economic, spatial, and social rural restructuring. The ultimate goal is to explore strategies that promote the sustainability of China's rural development by cultivating the endogenous power inherent in rural areas.

Chapter 2 reviews the emergence of a new category of farms under policy promotions, known as JiaTingNongChang (JTNCs), over the past decade. Termed as "family farms" in English, the Chinese government has introduced JTNCs as market-oriented agricultural entities characterized by moderate scale and family-based farming. The primary objective is to elevate peasants' subsistence farming, fostering agricultural modernization without excessive concentration of resources to agricultural enterprises. Applying Harriet Friedmann's theory, which delineates three categories of agricultural production related to embeddedness in global markets, this chapter scrutinizes China's JTNCs as a form of simple commodity production. The aim is to fully integrate family farming into the market economy. However, the policy preference for rewarding capable JTNCs rather than subsidizing all JTNCs has led to capitalist agricultural production exploiting the guise of JTNCs to secure government support. This chapter underscores the importance of increasing the resilience of JTNCs to market risks through government support and grounding the concept of family farming within the development of local rural communities. Chapter 3 delves into the geographic disappearance of a natural village in the context of a government-led village resettlement project. This project involves the conversion of rural land for urban industrial and commercial development, coupled with efforts toward agricultural modernization. Grounded in Henri Lefebvre's theory on *The Production of Space*, this chapter scrutinizes the absorption of the natural village into urban areas across physical, mental, and social dimensions. Examining the social space of villagers, often overlooked by government officials and entrepreneurs in their planning, this chapter reveals a restructuring of the social space through villagers' daily activities. Villagers navigate the challenges through their commitment to rural hukou and land, engagement in democratic community

management through online communication, unauthorized cultivation of urban gardens, and gathering in important traditional festivals. This restructuring of social space is aptly termed by villagers as a “virtual village.” This chapter underscores the significance of the common property regime in rural communities, emphasizing its role in preserving the well-being of peasants and promoting the community unity. This role, however, tends to be marginalized within urban market-oriented paradigms. Chapter 4 highlights a discernible trend in recent Chinese land policies: the reinforcement of individual peasants’ land rights at the expense of weakening collective land ownership. This shift aligns with the global prevalence of private property rights. The underlying rationale driving policies to bolster individual peasants’ land rights revolves around safeguarding peasants’ land tenure, encouraging long-term investment in land, and minimizing transaction costs to facilitate optimal land resource utilization. Through surveys conducted in three natural villages, this chapter elucidates the disparities between the logic underpinning policies and the realities on the ground. Importantly, this chapter argues that the common land system carries implications for ensuring local food security, advancing rural governance, and fostering the cohesion of rural communities. Chapter 5 delves into the dynamics of agricultural production and operations amid the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing a trend of repeasantization among some agricultural producers. Drawing inspiration from Jan Douwe van der Ploeg’s research on “the peasant condition,” this chapter examines how agricultural producers, in response to the challenges brought by COVID-19, have diversified their operations, constructed trust relationships with local consumers, participated in volunteer activities to fulfill social responsibility, and rethought cooperative relationships.

Chapter 6 addresses the research aims posed in Chapter 1. Although the functional separation between villages, agriculture and peasants has been noticed in Chinese rural studies, this dissertation further contends that the prevailing developmentalism and high modernity discourses on rural restructuring policies are accelerating the isolation of these three subjects, as well as creating a disjunction in economic, social, and spatial dimensions of rural restructuring. To achieve the unity of these dimensions, it is argued that cultivating the endogenous power of rural restructuring is crucial, with a particular emphasis on informal, daily, and persistent initiatives undertaken by peasants. Moreover, this dissertation advocates for the utilization of existing socialist mechanisms in Chinese villages, such as communally owned property regimes and redistribution strategies. It is suggested that leveraging these mechanisms can foster cooperation among individual peasants and contribute significantly to the sustainable development of rural areas.

Keywords: rural restructuring, policies, villages, peasants, endogenous, cooperation