A Study Into the Causes of the Dispute in China’s Rural Areas

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Abstract
The process of urbanization and industrialization in China, has been instrumental in depriving villagers of land and their way of life. This has led to a series of conflicts between government and villagers over the land. This issue has become the core of the conflict. The present from-top-to-bottom rural planning does not meet villagers’ needs. Within the rural area, there are close social and organizational relationships, the villagers strongly demand autonomy. This has led to conflict between the state and villagers’ rights of autonomy. The conflict is ongoing, it has never stopped. For the purpose of this paper, the rural area of Zhejiang Province was investigated. The method of the empirical study was employed in order to comprehensively analyze the developmental stage of urban-rural relations, planning systems, the conflict process, and difficulties in the process of urbanization. The study discovered that the conflict was led by different value orientations between the two stakeholders—the government and the villagers. This resulted in a series of conflicts over land and natural resources and added to the breakdown of relationships on both sides, this was an external manifestation of value orientation on both sides. In conclusion, the paper recommends conflict resolution proposals and measures to be employed at every stage of urbanization.

Keywords
Urbanization, rural areas, dispute, rural planning

According to the issued data of the sixth census (2010), China’s urbanization rate has reached to 49.68%, and by 2014, it has reached 54.77%. China is currently in the period of the fastest urbanization, which develops with as annual rate of 2%. However, the leapfrog progress in urbanization does not promote the common prosperity and stability in urban and rural areas. The gap between them continues to grow, thereby a huge risk of confrontation between urban and rural areas is on the way. Due to the high-concentration in spatial dimension and high-density in the time dimension as well as complexity in terms of content, the development of elements in all aspects of urban and rural economic and social system is rather uneven, giving rise to a series of complicated social problems (Liu 2011). In addition, a lack of sufficient time to settle them results in constant disputes in rural areas. Such disputes tend to evolve from certain point to a large scale and spread from some area to the whole, thereby, the uncertainties and risks have greatly increased.

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CHANGES IN THE RURAL SPATIAL STRUCTURE

The Government Tightened Its Control Over the Rural Construction Land, While Rural Residents Fought Against Such Controls

The central government has to control a total field of 120 million hectares which can only be used for agricultural production (Zang 2011). It means for all levels of governments to develop cities, the accessible fields are very scarce. Consequently, local governments turn to rural areas to seek land for urban development (Tao 2011). In such case, compared with the rapid expansion of urban areas, a large number of villages are unable to conduct construction due to its inaccessibility to needed land quotas, which makes villagers to break through the national control and adopt the practice of occupying field to undertake constructions first and accepting fines and compensations later.

According to the data of residential land in Kengpan Village, Zhejiang Province, one third of residential land coverage was illegally constructed buildings (see Figure 1). Supported by the concept that “The law does not impose punishment on the public” (Zhou 1998), villages began to fight against national policies, which governments are unable to deal with such actions by villagers.

The From-Top-To-Bottom Rural Planning Cannot Be Put Into Practice During the Process of Implementation

The central government requires local governments to develop rural planning in line with the interests of villagers, and this planning shall fully cover the administrative region that the local government is in control of. However, according to the survey covering a large number of villages in the Zhejiang Province, it is found that importance has not been truly attached to rural planning in terms of practice. Most rural plannings do not aim to solve the needs of village development. Therefore, rural planning has just been a task of the Construction and Planning Department of all-level governments. For instance, the rural planning in Yongkang, Zhejiang Province, covered 80% of all villages, plans for hundreds of villages have to be completed in a very short time. Thus, the Construction and Planning Department is always to be required to finish a large quantity of formulation of rural planning in very short period after they received the planning task.

During the interviews with members from the Institute of Planning and Design, Hengshui City, it is found that the institute is required to develop rural planning for about 10 villages within 15 days. So the rural planning task can be compared to a fast food, which actually is unable to make plans based on in-depth investigations and research, and also unable to facilitate the development of villages or satisfy the requirements of villagers. Instead, it arouses the conflicts between planning and real demands. Thereby, most plans having made are unable to be implemented.

By comparing the current situation of Wuxi Village in Wencheng County and its planning (see Figure 2), we can see the planning is completely not in line with the village reality, proving that the government and planners did not make the plan with serious consideration of interests of villagers. Such plans violating the actual demands of villagers, once implemented, certainly will trigger the resistance from villagers.

The top-to-bottom rural planning does conform to the requirements of the village development. Different from cities, much closer social and organizational relations exist in the internal villages in China, which have their own inherent logic for development (Fei, Hamilton, and Wang 1992). And villagers’ organizations in villages have been playing a decisive role in village construction, social and resource distribution since the ancient time; the inherited rules and regulations within villages politics have been considered as the law for rural planning and
Figure 1. Land Occupied Situation in Kengpan Village, Zhejiang Province.

Figure 2. Wuxi Village’s Current Situation and Planning.
governance. For policies and planning developed by governments are considered by the villagers as “alien” and “invading” to certain degree (Yang 1997). These such plannings are not in line with village reality, in particular the characteristics of villages or a lack of right guidance function, they certainly will trigger a series of confrontations. Unfortunately, amount of rural planning, in terms of both approaches and real implementations, are in conflicts against the requirements of villages or ignore its social and economic relations.

The Protest of Villagers Under the Background of Social Resources Distribution

With the rapid advancement of urbanization, cities strengthen the development and exploration of rural land, labor, and natural resources. Therefore, the inequality of resource distribution between urban and rural areas is intensified with the dual effect of the system and market.

Public products between them have a grave gap. Public service such as infrastructure, education, and medicare, lacks necessary transition and connection. For villagers who have been working in cities, the public welfare they enjoy is quite different from that of urban residents in the aspects of medicare, education, employment security, pension, and minimum living security. Inability to enjoy security in children’s education and medicare gives rise to the effect of intergeneration poverty (Fan 1999). Thereby, it further strengthens the inequality of development opportunities for urban and rural residents. The unbalanced distribution of public utilities in urban and rural areas and a lack of infrastructure and utilities further intensify the dissatisfaction of villagers for existing policies.

REASONS OF CONFLICTS

In the process of rapid development of China’s urbanization, a variety of intense conflicts took place in rural areas with complicated reasons. The planning conflicts in rural areas rose from the huge changes taking place in urban and rural system, which was always a combined result of various factors, and existing in objectively economic, social, and systematic environment as well as the subjective perception of urban and rural social groups.

The Essence: The Confronted Values Between Urban and Rural Residents

The authors held that the essence of the confrontation between urban and rural areas is different values given by the Chinese Government. Currently, the government is abiding by the strategy of focusing on economic progress and rapid development by large cities driving small and medium-sized cities. In such cases, villages have to sacrifice for urban development: provide cities with essential productive elements, cheap labor, and low-price land (Cao 2010). The mainstream in China is that agriculture has to facilitate the industrial development and the rural areas provide help for urban development. It is such value that strengthens the social conflicts, resulting in the confrontation between urban and rural areas.

The reasons for the existence of such value are also various, of which, China’s fiscal system is closest related. In 1994, China carried out the tax reform, which enhanced the macro control capacity of the central government. However, over the past 20 years since its implementation, the accumulated prominent problem is fiscal dilemma and debt crisis facing local governments, in particular governments at the county level. In such a context, local governments are keen on urban expansion, whose main reason is that through it, local governments can maximize their fiscal revenue (Zhang and Wu 2006). According to the research conducted in Zhejiang Province, the basic pattern of government finance in developed regions is relying on the industrial tax effect brought by urban
expansion within the budget and relying on the revenue of land transfer beyond budget. Urban expansion mainly depends on the development of building and property industries which are closely related to land. So government finance in developed areas is the “land finance”. Local government achieved primitive accumulation at both national and regional levels through expropriation of villagers’ land. The research shows that 20%-30% of the revenue of some local governments is from land transfer. The weakest urban areas have become major prey of governments at all levels. On the one hand, they encourage rural population to provide cheap labor for cities, and on the other hand, they deprived rural residents of their land where generations of villagers lived.

Guided by such value, governments will satisfy the needs of urban development for resource in a priority to sacrifice the interests of villagers. Likewise, with this value, the formulation of concentrated placement for villagers, which seems conductive to improvement of villagers’ living standards, actually aims to concentrate large scale of land to satisfy the needs of urban development.

**Social System: The Gap Between Urban and Rural Areas**

The urbanization in China is largely dominated by local governments, which bravely ignore the relationship in the urban and rural relationship and its integration. With the system of the urban-rural dual structure, in China, cities and countryside have been separated into two independent systems, with resource limited within their own fields, instead of free flow between urban and rural areas. With such a context, conflicts between urban and rural areas are in a hidden state. With the relaxed urban-rural dual structural system and rapid advancement of urbanization, resource elements begin to flow dramatically in a large scale (Zhao 2012). However, restricted by factors such as household registration system as well as land system, its flow is always out of order and irregular, which gives rise to a large number of social contradictions and frictions. Thereby conflicts between urban and rural areas become gradually apparent, increasing the uncertainties and costs of urbanization. As a result, it is hard to say the urban-rural system has been an open and mutually beneficial system as the relationship between two areas is still restricted by a lot of realistic factors and is discontinuous and less well-connected.

**Land and Market System: Governments Are Absolutely in Control of Rural Land**

With the progress in urbanization, the development of non-market ambiguous property is accelerating. Chinese farmlands that are used for nonagricultural purposes is increasing with a surprising speed. While the non-market ambiguous property provides the systematic basis for compulsory non-agricultural use of farmlands (Jin 2008). The ambiguity of farmland property is mainly reflected by the vagueness in effective control over farmland by the state, rural collective organizations, and villagers. According to the relevant regulation of the Land Administration Law of the People’s Republic of China, the only legal way for farmland to be used for non-agricultural purposes is land acquisition. Local governments become a real manager for rural land and a monopoly supplier of land acquisition. Governments have become the real dominator in the farmland conversion process, facilitating giant groups to benefit from land acquisition based on common interest and thereby imposing social cost on vulnerable groups (Yao 2002). With the increasing number of villagers losing land and the deepened damage that villagers suffer, contradiction and conflicts tend to multiply and be intensified.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Personally speaking, to solve the urban-rural conflicts,
the priority shall be put on the three aspects. The first one is to establish correct values. It is better to take the harmonious development of urban and rural areas as a major strategy for future urban and rural planning and development to break the separated urban-rural pattern. The common prosperity of rural and urban development should be equally valued. The distribution of public finance shall be in line with the needs of the economic and social development for both urban and rural areas to create a fair development environment for urban and rural residents and achieve the fair and reasonable distribution of cost and revenue in urban areas. Therefore, it facilitates the urbanization results to be shared by all people and the urban and rural area, finally promoting the urban-rural integration. Second, reducing the intervention in the urbanization process. With the more use of market mechanism to reasonably distribute resources, including land resources, attach great importance to the integrity and relevance of the urban-rural relationship, which is the law of urbanization, to facilitate both areas to share public resources and resources to flow reasonably and orderly. Thereby, it can achieve the natural integration of urban and rural in terms of both economic and social development. Third, the planning shall be made combined two from-top-to-bottom and from-bottom-to-top modes. Meanwhile, villagers shall be invited to participate in the rural planning, and give them equal public rights. In this way, rural planning will become a coordination means, instead of a from-top-to-bottom control.

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References


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