Rural urbanization under Xi Jinping: From rapid community building to steady urbanization?

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Abstract
‘Rural community building’ is one of the most prominent policies of rural urbanization and village renovation in China. Since the nationwide implementation of this policy within the scope of the programme ‘Building a new socialist countryside’, the large-scale construction of new residential complexes has accelerated the transformation of the country’s rural landscape. However, extensive demolition and relocation have drawn increasing criticism, and the policy has become synonymous with the seizure of rural land resources by local governments. When Xi Jinping came to power, the new leadership initially appeared to abandon the policy but has eventually revived it. This article studies the implementation and evolution of the rural community building policy as a case of policy learning. The analysis of national and local policy documents and implementation practices in four provinces highlights a new framing of the policy, more intensive hierarchical controls over rural land use, and the state’s increasing reach into village governance, as well as new incentives for local governments to continue with demolition and relocation projects. These changes reveal a mode of policy learning in the context of an authoritarian regime whose goal is to improve policy implementation in the face of growing public criticism and social tension.

Keywords
rural communities, new urbanization, new socialist countryside, land regulation, policy learning, central–local relations

Over the past few decades, new residential complexes often consisting of uniform multi-storey buildings have sprung up across China’s rural landscape. One of the most prominent policies behind this transformation is ‘rural community building’ (农村社区建设). Introduced as part of the rural development programme ‘Building a new socialist...
countryside’, the policy presents local governments with a rare opportunity to implement central policy goals while pursuing their own interests. Local governments have especially made use of community building to gain control over rural land, to attract investors in construction, real estate, and agriculture, as well as to promote the modernization and urbanization of the countryside in general.\footnote{1} However, the rushed and widespread implementation of community building has also caused several problems, including the large-scale demolition of villages and increasing rural tension, and it has continued to negatively affect public perception of rural urbanization.\footnote{2} In 2013, after Xi Jinping came to power, the central government reacted to these developments by halting local implementation of the policy in at least one province and by omitting the term ‘rural communities’ from subsequent policy documents. According to local cadres at the time, the slogan that the upper administrative levels used to guide their local community building work changed from ‘forcefully’ pushing rural community building to ‘steadily’ advancing urbanization.\footnote{3} When the term returned to national policy documents two years later, it formed an integral part of China’s ‘new-type urbanization’ policy.

This article examines the evolution of China’s rural community building policy as a case of policy learning in an authoritarian context. Previous studies have emphasized the role of local practices and experimentation in facilitating learning among Chinese policymakers. Sebastian Heilmann has shown how decentralized experimentation in economic policymaking can be a source of innovation, minimize the cost of learning for the central government, and allow central policymakers to introduce even more radical reform objectives over time.\footnote{4} Wang Shaoguang’s study on rural health care in China expands the scope of policy learning to other policy fields and includes experiences drawn from different local and international practices as potential sources of learning.\footnote{5} Both Heilmann and Wang stress the importance of obtaining input from external actors (social actors and policy advocates) to improve China’s learning and adaptive capacity. But because they differ with regard to underlying conceptualizations of the motivations for policy change among the political elite, this leads to contrasting assessments of learning outcomes in rural health care. According to Heilmann, the ‘Chinese practice of elite-sponsored experimentation geared toward opening new channels for profit-seeking and rent-seeking opportunities’\footnote{6} may favour innovation in economic policies but presumably not in policies concerned with the provision of public goods and services for the economically weak segments of society. By contrast, Wang stresses the problem-solving capacities of Chinese policymakers and finds that China is ‘fully capable of using various learning models to explore better ways of providing health care (and even the entire welfare system) to its citizens’.\footnote{7} Regardless of the actual outcomes of policy learning in rural health care, both studies neglect the fact that China’s policymakers, as part of the ruling political elite in an authoritarian system, are strongly motivated by the need to preserve political power. This distinct dimension of policy learning in the context of an authoritarian regime deserves further attention. In this respect, the evolution of rural community building since its official formulation in 2008 is significant. The following analysis reveals that policy reformulations under Xi Jinping have, thus far, neither altered local policymakers’ rent-seeking opportunities nor substantially improved public goods provision. The findings suggest that the focus of learning among Chinese policymakers in this case is, above all, on increasing the policy’s legitimacy.
and facilitating its implementation without really responding to public criticism or input from external actors. The means for this endeavour include changes to the framing of the policy for the purpose of altering the dominant policy image; more intensive hierarchical controls in China’s central–local relations, in particular rural land use; the state’s increasing reach into grass-roots governance; and new incentives for local governments to accelerate community building.

The findings of this article are based both on a study of national and local government documents and on fieldwork data collected mainly between September 2012 and March 2014 in four provinces: the three largely agricultural provinces of Henan, Anhui, and Jiangxi, as well as the more prosperous and industrialized Jiangsu Province. The period between 2012 and 2014 allowed for the investigation of implementation practices before, during, and after central policy reformulations. I visited close to 20 new rural communities – many of which were then still under construction – in six county-level entities and conducted semi-structured (group and personal) interviews, as well as informal conversations, with more than 40 county cadres and close to 30 township cadres. In addition, I conducted a number of interviews with city officials, village cadres, agricultural entrepreneurs, and villagers at the research sites.

Rural community building under the new socialist countryside programme

Since the early 2000s, various local policy initiatives have experimented with merging and renovating villages or establishing new urban-like residential areas for villagers. Two models of early community building stand out. In areas strongly affected by poverty and migration, the goal of rural communities was mainly to improve village infrastructure and public service provision and reduce the amount of fallow land. By contrast, around large cities and in the economically strong eastern provinces, local governments experimented with integrating urban and rural service provision and optimizing land use for the purposes of housing, industry, and agriculture. In 2008, the political leadership under Hu Jintao acknowledged the local initiatives when it integrated rural community building into its rural development programme of building a new socialist countryside. Generally, the new communities sought to improve ‘social management’ and bring ‘harmonious stability’ to the countryside. In the same year, the Ministry of Civil Affairs selected close to 300 experimental counties; the following year, it started to establish model units for nationwide coverage and planned to increase their number at regular intervals.

Despite the central policy initiative, experimentation continued to be rather decentralized, and provincial governments tried out different kinds of concepts and terms, including ‘village communities’ (村落社区), ‘rural communities’ (农村社区), ‘central villages’ (中心村), and ‘town communities’ (镇社区). These entities concentrated the population at different administrative levels ranging from the grass roots to towns. In a comparison between administrative villages and new rural communities, Li Yonghua lists three models: ‘one village, one community’, ‘several villages, one community’, and ‘one village, many communities’. Unfortunately, nationwide figures are not available, and even provincial data are hard to come by because the communities are neither administrative entities nor organizations of village autonomy. In 2006, the Jiangsu authorities claimed that they had
already built 18,961 new rural communities, supposedly according to the one village, one community model.\textsuperscript{13} Jiangxi had pursued the one village, many communities model and, according to official statistics, it had built 30,454 communities by the end of 2010; the position of these communities was between administrative and natural villages.\textsuperscript{14} Both Anhui and Henan provinces had established large-scale rural communities consisting of several villages. By May 2012, Anhui had built 937 such communities,\textsuperscript{15} and by the end of 2012, Henan had constructed over 4100 rural communities.\textsuperscript{16}

One available source of data indicating the scope of village concentration is the numbers provided by the Ministry of Land and Resources (since 2018, the Ministry of Natural Resources) regarding land regulation activities and the annual increase in agricultural land (Figure 1). These figures show that, particularly in the period of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2011–2015), land regulation created large new areas of agricultural land. Since the construction of residential complexes for rural communities entails multi-storey buildings and optimized land use, resulting in a reduction in land for village construction, it stands to reason that a considerable part of the increase in agricultural land is attributable to rural community building.

Saving construction land is important for local governments because, under China’s land management regulations, all governments have to protect the quota of farmland within their territories. Moreover, under the principle of ‘balancing occupation with a supply of farmland’ (耕地占补平衡), in case local governments want to appropriate farmland for urban expansion and convert it into construction land, they must create new farmland elsewhere in

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Amount of new agricultural land and new farmland obtained by means of land regulation, 2006–17.}
\textbf{Source:} 数据 – 自然资源公报 (Data – reports of natural resources), 中华人民共和国自然资源部 (Ministry of Natural Resources of the People’s Republic of China), http://www.mnr.gov.cn/sj/tjgb/, accessed 24 May 2019.
\end{figure}
their territory. One way to create new farmland is to reduce village housing land through rural community building. Accordingly, community building has become an important policy tool for many local governments seeking urban development.

Interestingly, during the first few years of Xi Jinping’s leadership, the policy of rural community building was neglected. Neither the Central Committee’s ‘Decisions on some major issues concerning comprehensively deepening the reform’ nor the National Urbanization Plan even mentioned the term. Was this the manifestation of a silent abandonment of a policy experiment? In retrospect, it appears to mark a short interruption during a period of reorientation of policymaking.

**New leadership, new rhetoric: Altering the policy image of rural community building**

For years, scholars, the media, and even local policymakers have blamed local practices of rural community building for causing a whole range of problems, including the large-scale demolition of villages and forced relocation of villagers, lack of consideration of local conditions, lack of building quality, and lack of public service provision. After the leadership succession in 2013, several central policy documents, whilst neglecting the policy of rural community building, noted various problems related to policy implementation that had arisen in previous years. The National Urbanization Plan, for example, openly criticizes the tendency in some rural areas to ‘copy mechanically the urban model of housing estates when building the new countryside’. In the chapter entitled ‘Building the new socialist countryside’, the plan emphasizes the promotion of ‘different beautiful villages with special characteristics’. In contrast to building something new, the emphasis here is on protecting villages with cultural, historical, and other special features. Moreover, the plan renews calls for protecting and expanding the rural population’s legal rights to their farmland, housing land, and homesteads.

In May 2015, after a two-year absence, the policy of rural community building re-emerged as a central policy objective. The relevant documents reveal the centre’s attempts to renew the policy image and reframe rural community building as an integral part of the new-type urbanization policy. The Ministry of Civil Affairs claimed that it was ‘a new step in rural community building under new conditions’. To be sure, many formulations in the relevant documents were primarily aimed at rehabilitating the original purpose of the policy. The Chinese Communist Party Central Committee’s ‘Guiding Opinions on Further Advancing the Pilot Work of Rural Community Building’, for example, considers rural communities to be the ‘basic units of rural social service management’ and a possible solution to demographic problems resulting from migration, such as empty villages, left-behind groups, and an increase in the non-registered population. Other formulations point to further deviations from the original rhetoric. Most importantly, the ‘pilot work’ distinguishes between rural communities in ‘villages in the city’ (城中村), villages on the outskirts of cities, and population concentration spots in the countryside. This hierarchy of rural communities in the documents shifts the attention to cities and urban development. Where the countryside is concerned, the documents make it clear that the large-scale demolition of villages is ‘strictly prohibited’.
The focus on villages in the city is especially surprising. Villages in the city are residential areas of villages that were urbanized when nearby cities rapidly expanded and encroached on village territory. While these residential areas are located in urban districts, the land remains collectively owned. Usually, urban planning does not affect these areas, and many villages in cities have become migrant enclaves providing cheap and informal housing in those cities. In recent years, this latter function has drawn high-level attention to the phenomenon, including the National Urbanization Plan’s emphasis on renovating villages in cities and shanty towns (棚户区). Turning villages in the city into rural communities is a new phenomenon, which associates rural community building with urbanization. In the ‘Plan for Building an Urban–Rural Community Service System (2016–2020)’, there is no distinction between the long-established urban communities and the new rural communities.

Another use of rhetoric concerns the government’s approach to the long-standing debate on how to increase the benefits of rural community building for the rural population. For years, ongoing land conflicts have sparked heated debate among scholars and policymakers about the path of land market reforms and the further commodification of rural land. Much of the debate revolves around the question of whether the introduction of legally recognized property rights would benefit or harm the rural population’s long-term interests. After the leadership succession, open debate on this matter subsided. The new leadership announced that it would stabilize rural land contracts and thereby protect the existing household contract responsibility system. It would also allow farmers to use their contracted land for a much broader scope of industrialized operations and transfers to other users. In the years that followed, these reforms were subsumed under the ‘division of three rights’ (三权分置). This ideological balancing act answers both sides of the debate on legally recognized property rights in rural China and presents the central government as the protector of the rural population’s land rights. However, the government’s work report in 2018 revealed that actual policy changes were watered down and that the stabilization of contract rights did not mean the introduction of quasi-property rights for villagers. The report only mentioned that the validity of the original contracts was extended by an additional 30 years. The repeatedly declared plans to allow rural construction land to enter the market on equal terms with state-owned urban land have not yet taken off.

The following sections analyse local policy papers and implementation practices during the period of policy reformulation in four provinces. The aim is to understand what policy learning entails in rural community building beyond the use of rhetoric to enhance the image of the policy and to link it to Xi’s new-type urbanization programme.

A note on research sites

Rural community building projects that were implemented in the research sites adopted different community building models according to the size and administrative position of the new communities. Except for a research site under a county-level city in Suzhou (which, for the sake of confidentiality, will be called C), Jiangsu Province, all sites were located in mainly agricultural regions where large parts of the population still owned farmland and worked as farmers or had left to take up non-farming jobs in cities. The site
in Jiangsu served as a counterexample because it was an area where rural urbanization and industrialization practices had developed since the 1980s, where most villagers no longer owned farmland, and where political experiments with ‘urban–rural integration’ policies were at an advanced stage. Among the other research sites were four townships in two rural counties under Kaifeng in Henan Province, four townships in two county-level districts (Q under Bozhou, Anhui Province, and W under Nanchang, Jiangxi Province) and four townships in a county-level city (T under Anyang, Henan Province), the last of which I visited twice. As far as possible, research sites closer to and farther away from the nearest city were selected.

**Bringing local policies into line**

The analysis of local-level documents on rural community building and the local urbanization plans of the four provinces under scrutiny reveals widespread adaptation to the new rhetoric of village renovation. Over time, the term ‘new socialist countryside’ was mentioned less and less frequently. However, it should be noted that, despite the centre’s neglect, rural communities did not vanish completely from local plans. The different approaches to rural community building in the local plans seem to indicate big differences in how central policymakers evaluated the local experiments. The Jiangsu ‘Plan for New-Type Urbanization and Urban–Rural Integration’, for example, not only retained the term ‘rural communities’ but continued the institutionalization of communities as the third level of local governance subordinate to counties and towns when it came to social service provision and human resource management.30 The Jiangsu approach to rural community building can, therefore, be regarded as one that is centrally approved. Jiangsu is one of the pioneers of the three concentrations in the Yangtze River Delta. In addition, the provincial government’s approach to rural community building corresponds well to the centre’s new rhetorical focus on parity between urban and rural infrastructure and social welfare benefits.

By contrast, Henan provincial documents made no mention of the term rural communities after 2013, and thus Henan offers a striking example of central disapproval. In fact, Henan’s approach to rural community building can be considered one of the triggers of policy change by the centre after 2013. Henan only started implementing its own approach to rural community building in 2011, under Party Secretary Lu Zhangong (in office from 2009 to 2013). This approach was radical in that it attempted to catch up on implementation by setting specific numerical targets for rural communities that prefectures had to achieve as early as the end of 2012. Prefectures subsequently set even higher targets for their localities and made implementation performance a ‘one-item veto’ (一票否决), which in the event of non-fulfilment would result in the dismissal of the cadre responsible. As my fieldwork and media reports have revealed, the rushed implementation not only greatly increased the pressure on local cadres to deliver but also produced various problems which hindered implementation, ranging from low-quality construction and forced demolition and relocation to social unrest.31 In September 2013, following the central leadership succession, the provincial government under the new Party Secretary Guo Gengmao (in office from 2013 to 2016) had to suspend rural community building beyond urban planning areas.32 It also removed the task of community building
from the performance evaluation sheet for local cadres. Upon my second visit to county-level city T in March 2014, I learned that the provincial government’s move to abandon the policy had taken local authorities by surprise. County and township cadres had been busy demolishing villages and making compensation deals with villagers to relocate them when several community projects were suddenly put on hold. By the end of 2016, the construction of 1366 rural communities, more than one-third of all community projects in the province, was halted.33

In contrast to the clear position taken by the Jiangsu and Henan governments regarding the rural community building policy, local policy documents from Jiangxi and Anhui neither omitted nor used the term prominently. During the interviews, local cadres made no particular mention of change, and local implementation practices continued despite central policy changes.

**Strengthening hierarchical controls**

After the abrupt policy change in Henan, the local cadres there expected the National Urbanization Plan, whose publication had already been delayed several times, to guide their implementation work. However, when the plan was finally published, it did not contain any details about the rural community building policy, which left the cadres concerned unsure about how to proceed. Personal interviews with the cadres revealed that they were still receiving new implementation guidelines. Most importantly, community construction and villager relocation had to be slowed down and to proceed in an orderly manner. Local cadres in T stated that in 2013 they were informed that they should no longer forcefully push community building, with every government agency and every village supporting it, but instead they should ‘steadily’ advance urbanization.34 The central government institutionalized the slowdown in 2016, when the Ministry of Civil Affairs announced that pilot work would ‘put quality before quantity’ (宁缺毋滥) and involve a maximum of 100 central model units for rural community building every three years.35 As explained later on in this article, it is doubtful whether this change in pilot work has led to a slowdown in rural community construction or other village concentration projects. However, as the example of T shows, the official policy change did at least instil a sense of caution among local governments regarding the means of implementation. Moreover, local governments now had to stick to formal procedures of approval, which, apparently, had not been the case before. As one leading township cadre in T explained,

[Now] you have to respect the documents. If you don’t respect the documents, there is no way you can do it [i.e. construct communities].... In 2011 and 2012, when it was pushed forcefully, they didn’t handle the formalities. The government said it had to be taken care of during building. In reality, once you started building, no one cared, and then nobody took care of it.36

Compared with the formalization of procedures in Henan, other forms of interference by higher administrative levels in community building practices have increased more gradually. Early on in the policy implementation process, central, provincial, and prefectural imperatives had already reduced the discretion of lower-level governments with regard to village renovation practices and had steered implementation towards support for villages
that were economically better off, and in favour of uniformity and urbanization. Lior Rosenberg specifically mentions fiscal constraints, targets, and performance evaluation criteria as tools used by the upper levels to steer rural community building politics. The strong impact of China’s hierarchical command politics on rural urbanization was confirmed by the case studies reported here. Most importantly, land management institutions have become an ever more important governing tool. After the policy change in 2013, particularly in the provinces dominated by agriculture, there was an increase in interference in local land management from higher-level governments. According to local cadres in T, the municipal government had previously allocated a construction land quota of 5000 to 6000 mu to the county-level city every year, but to their surprise, the municipal government reduced the quota to 300 mu in 2013. It was only after intense negotiations that the quota was raised to 500 mu. Moreover, one township had prepared a village for demolition and relocation to a new rural community because of a local road construction project, when, unexpectedly, the municipal government changed these county plans on account of its own plans to build an entertainment district. At the time of my visit, the township cadres had no other choice but to prepare the demolition of three other villages instead. According to them, this change led to major chaos. Similar episodes indicating the loss of local discretion over rural land management have played out at all field sites. At the time of my visit to Q (Anhui Province), a township close to the city, which in previous years had received national acclaim as a model town for growing medicinal herbs and a provincial award for outstanding tourist township, had tried to continue its development path as a tourist destination. Local cadres had even started to plant medicinal herbs instead of grain on all remaining township land. The next year, however, the township was swallowed up by the nearby city district which had already used most of the land belonging to the township’s villages for an industrial park. The township cadres were left to implement land expropriation and villager resettlement. Another township in Q, farther away from the city, had previously used idle construction land – for example, from abandoned village schools, merged factories, former grain supply centres, and cooperatives – to establish factories. However, increasing interference by higher administrative levels ended this kind of decentralized land use. At the time of my visit, the township had to turn down investment offers due to an insufficient construction land quota. In general, county and township cadres were worried about the reduced local discretion over land use, and some had already given up making any plans for local development. Instead, they relied on the bonus payments that they received from upper-level governments for the amount of rural construction land that they saved, mostly through community building, which they then passed on to the higher urban governments. As mentioned earlier, this construction land quota could be used to further expand the territory of cities.

The increase in hierarchical control even crosses the lines of the formal administrative system because, with rural community building, the government reaches deep into the realm of village self-government. As providers of public services, the new communities, in contrast to the village committees, are not autonomous organizations but organizational extensions of the government at the grass-roots level. In Jiangsu Province, the new communities are an officially recognized level of local governance. Party committees and village committees use either ‘community (village)’ or ‘community’ as their organizational affiliation. In the Henan field sites, township governments often put up their own offices, or command
posts, in the communities to coordinate the interests of the different village committees. Furthermore, the mere fact that new communities usually reduce the spatial distribution of village-level organizations makes it easier for the government to intervene. Although rural community building does not automatically involve a reduction in the number of village committees, according to official statistics the overall number of village committees in China has decreased significantly since 2013. This decline is not counterbalanced by faster growth in urban neighbourhood committees (see Figure 2).

Community building also reduces the number of village cadres and significantly changes their role in grass-roots governance. In C in Jiangsu Province, for example, one rural community had resulted from a merger of seven villages, which reduced the number of leading village cadres from 42 to only 10.\(^{45}\) Once villages are converted into a community, the management of the rural communities necessitates even closer cooperation with the townships. In terms of work content, the provision and management of public goods and services in the communities replace other tasks and responsibilities of village cadres – most importantly, those in the sphere of land politics.\(^{46}\) Village committees in the communities have to operate a whole range of new services, from reading and computer rooms to garbage disposal. A town in C (Jiangsu Province) experimented with combining rural communities with homes for the elderly so that the village committees had to provide services such as blood pressure measurement, meal delivery, and tea-houses. One town cadre summed up the situation as follows: ‘Village committees have two signs: One is “villager autonomy committee”, and one is “community management”’.\(^{47}\) A transformation towards the latter seems inevitable.

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**Figure 2.** Number of village committees and neighbourhood committees in China, 2007–17. Source: 年度数据 (Annual data), 中华人民共和国国家统计局 (National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China), http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01, accessed 24 April 2019. Please refer to 社会服务 (Social services) – 社会服务机构基本情况 (Basic information about social service organizations) – 社会服务机构单位数 (Number of social service organizational units).
Continuing and accelerating implementation

At most of the field sites, despite the new rhetoric, the official slowdown in national pilot work, and the strengthened hierarchical controls over implementation practices, rural community building has continued to be implemented in almost the same manner as before. Another aspect that also remained more or less unchanged was the local governments’ lack of attention or capacity in the provision of public services, which is one of the policy’s main goals. In 2016, the Ministry of Civil Affairs set a goal of equipping at least 50 per cent of rural communities with service facilities by 2020.48 However, the most recent available data for the distribution of service facilities (including service stations and service centres) in rural communities in the provinces under study show that, to date, agricultural regions in particular have not managed to build such facilities (see Figure 3).

As mentioned earlier, the general policy reorientation did not have as much significance for Anhui and Jiangxi provinces as it did for Henan. However, even in Henan, where rural community building had been abolished, the new policy rhetoric allowed many of the projects to continue. In 2014, local cadres in T were quick to reframe their projects in line with the new policies. Even before the official publication of the National Urbanization Plan and the subsequent central guidelines, local cadres in T renamed several villages scheduled for demolition as ‘villages in the city’. This seemed surprising given the rural nature of the areas under construction; in fact, the villages of the rural community building projects that were renamed did not share the same features as

Figure 3. Number of service facilities (stations) in rural communities in different provinces, 2012–17.

Source: 民政数据 – 统计季报 – 省级数据 (Civil affairs data – quarterly statistical reports – provincial-level data). 中华人民共和国民政部 (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China), http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/cjib/sjsj/, accessed 18 October 2018.
villages in the city as discussed in the current literature. The only sufficient criterion for the redefinition seemed to be their location within a designated urban planning territory. Because Chinese county-level cities also include large rural areas, it is hard to distinguish these ‘urban villages’ from other villages. During the interviews, there was some confusion among the cadres themselves about how many and which projects were counted as village-in-the-city renovations. The new villages in the city were not a destination for migrants either. On the contrary, in one of the rural communities that was renamed a village-in-the-city renovation site, the loss of farmland resulted in a rapid increase in the rate of migration to about 60 per cent. However, local governments in Henan seemed to use the term as a way out of the financial dilemma created by the central government’s disapproval of their community building approach. Xinhua reported that, by the end of 2016, local governments in Henan had lost more than RMB 600 billion due to the halt in construction. Under the new name of village in the city, however, projects in the field site could continue. Since urban redevelopment projects are eligible for fiscal resources from the centre, villages in the city also feature prominently in Henan’s urbanization plan, which was published shortly after the national plan. The plan set a target of redeveloping the villages in the city for 1.68 million households. Overall, the urbanization of villages in the city and villages on the outskirts and in development zones was expected to affect about six million people. The other provinces under study in this article have not been under such pressure to adapt their community building approaches to the new policy rhetoric. However, it can be assumed that, when the required slowdown in policy implementation and the allocation of new resources take effect nationwide, they will also, where possible, reframe village concentration and restructure rural space as urban redevelopment.

In recent national policy papers, other reforms apart from those mentioned in the high-profile Urbanization Plan and Five-Year Plan have gained much less attention but can be expected to create new incentives to continue and accelerate rural community building or similar forms of village concentration. Most importantly, central documents in 2016 encouraged the full-scale implementation of ‘linking the expansion of urban with the reduction of rural construction land’. Since 2005, pilot projects have implemented this policy of linking up (挂钩政策) at specific project sites to protect arable land and rationalize rural construction land usage. Informally, however, the practice spread quickly because it gave local governments the opportunity to increase urban construction land quotas for their localities beyond the tight quotas allocated by higher administrative levels according to land use plans. Previous research has identified this practice as one of the main reasons for accelerated village demolition and villager relocation. Recent new-type urbanization policies formalize and further promote this practice. To implement the policy, the Ministry of Land and Resources openly recommends relocating the rural population to towns and central villages. In contrast to the general guidelines of new-type urbanization, these more specific policies clearly signal to local governments that they should continue with previous implementation practices, particularly because the recommendations are in line with existing provincial and prefectural policies. In 2013, for example, the city of Nanchang (Jiangxi) increased incentives for village demolition when it pushed the provincial ‘top 100 central towns’ (百强中心镇) policy by offering 600 mu of land to 10 successful counties. Because of their scarce land resources
and the increasingly expensive price tag of additional construction land quota, town cadres saw this as an added incentive to speed up their demolition and relocation work.\textsuperscript{55}

Using land quotas as a direct incentive for policy implementation is an approach that has recently been picked up by the central government. The Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) offers an increase in construction land quota of cities if they absorb more rural-to-urban migrants. This new linking-up mechanism is supposed to accelerate the integration – or ‘citizenization’ (市民化) – of migrants in cities and thereby help to turn the land-based urban expansion policies into ‘people-centred urbanization’. Many aspects of this new policy are still unclear. For example, what are the requirements of integration and which size or administrative level of cities is the policy mainly concerned with? In any case, in view of scarce construction land resources and the current land management regime, we can expect local governments to try to use the new policy to increase their construction land quota. Besides accelerating the integration process for landless peasants, this would mean increasing pressure on migrants to give up their rural land use rights and intensifying demolition and relocation work on the rural fringes.

**What role do external actors play?**

External actors have played a minor role in the policy-learning process, because the central government seems to have responded mainly to local implementation practices and only indirectly to public debates and policy advisors. However, over the past few years, there has been growing interest among external actors for rural community building and other village concentration and resettlement projects, including agricultural corporations, construction companies, and planning institutes. Most of them benefit from increased implementation of the rural community building policy and have established close contacts with local policymakers. For years, the confrontational nature of rural community building, village demolition, and villager relocation has led county and township governments to include more and more external actors in the implementation work. At all field sites, a common practice was to seek cooperation from companies that offered employment, dividends, and other benefits to the peasants once they had left the village land and presumably transferred their farmland use rights.\textsuperscript{56} County governments also spent some money to attract investors who helped to persuade the villagers to relocate.\textsuperscript{57} As soon as particular stakeholders or the majority of villagers had benefited from the arrangements that the company offered, there were no further disruptions of the demolition work and land transfers.

Counties and even townships increasingly seek to involve professional planning institutes in village restructuring. This seems surprising, because the authority of lower-level governments over land use and zoning is highly limited, but rural governments use the professionally drafted plans as a resource to advertise their own development concepts to authorities higher up. Moreover, these institutes assist them with demolition and relocation or may even take over relocation negotiations with villagers. In T (Henan), township cadres pointed out that most villagers did not understand the technical language used in the plans.\textsuperscript{58} Thus, the plans created the impression of an impartial authoritative concept for an orderly transformation of the rural space, which helped foster compliance.
In many places, in addition to professional actors, local governments have included specially selected villagers in the implementation process. Often, village representatives participate in decision-making regarding construction details. When local cadres have to apply more pressure to convince the last remaining households to relocate, they usually do this by means of so-called ‘thought work’ (思想工作), which comprises all sorts of persuasion tactics, and even the use of violence. A town head in Q explained: ‘We rarely force expropriation.... We usually communicate with them (i.e. the villagers) through their relatives and friends. This is middle-man consultation.’59 Using relatives to help persuade reluctant villagers, as well as hiring people (often thugs) to approach them, is a common strategy.60 In one township in W (Jiangxi), for example, local cadres systematically persuaded villagers through their children. Most of the younger generation of villagers worked as migrants in large cities, and local cadres found them to be more receptive to relocation. Thus, the cadres allowed the children of affected villagers to make decisions and then persuade their parents. As one town cadre put it: ‘When relatives do the work, the results are better than when government personnel do it. Sometimes the decisions that relatives make forcefully violate the will of the parents, but these parents can’t blame their own children, right?’61 These strategies reveal growing cleavages among villagers’ views on village concentration and relocation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, as in the example above, these cleavages run mainly along generational lines.

Recent national reform initiatives seem to reinforce such cleavages. The desired outcome of ongoing and planned reforms to create a rural land market is to increase the economic gains of peasants through the urbanization process. However, these reforms also incentivize villagers to engage in more land deals. Moreover, the theoretical increase in villagers’ land use rights applies only to those who actually transfer their use rights. This empowerment of some could lead to intensifying conflicts over land use within the affected villages. In turn, however, it could mitigate some of the local governments’ burden of persuasion, because this would be done by those villagers in favour of village demolition. In the case of the Chengdu Agriculture Equity Exchange (hereafter Chengdu Exchange), a government-based service platform that organizes the transfer of rural property and land use rights, such collusion between village beneficiaries and local governments has already been institutionalized. In 2016, the organization employed about 2000 local agents to ‘motivate villagers to transfer their use rights’, as the executive director explained in a one-on-one conversation.62 These agents make a 0.5 per cent commission for every quota exchange, and they can participate in the projects. The director claimed that the Chengdu Exchange plans to train 10,000 such agents over the next three years. Asked what the village committees thought of this practice, a Chengdu Exchange representative pointed out that many of these agents were, in fact, village leaders.63

**Conclusion**

Recent policy changes under Xi Jinping confirm that rural community building has gone wrong in the eyes of the leadership. The neglect and subsequent reframing of the policy provide interesting insights into a process of policy learning in the context of an authoritarian regime whose aim is to increase a policy’s legitimacy and improve implementation without really responding to input from external actors or changing the policy’s major
objectives. One key aspect of this process is introducing a new twist to a rhetoric that seeks to correct the association with large-scale demolition and relocation projects and the merging of villages for the sake of land accumulation. After the leadership succession and a period of policy reorientation, the centre started to revive the image of rural community building as a vehicle for promoting public service provision and grass-roots governance in the context of the new-type urbanization policy. As the analysis of policy implementation in the four provinces reveals, this rhetoric has had surprisingly little effect on actual implementation practices. New incentives for local elites in the field of land management show that, despite the changes in rhetoric, the purpose of rural community building is still the same: to accelerate the spatial restructuring of the countryside.

However, policy learning in the case of rural community building does not stop with rhetorical changes. The cases studied here exemplified how China’s experimentation-based policy learning enables small but regionally specific adjustments in experimentation approaches while still keeping the policy in place. The central government obviously disapproved of the Henan approach and urged the province to adjust its implementation tools, while it approved the Jiangsu approach and was not greatly involved in the approaches of the other two provinces, Anhui and Jiangxi.

Other policy adjustments reinforce tendencies that formed under previous leaderships and aim to increase the central state’s authority by strengthening hierarchical controls over land use changes and informal local practices of community building. Moreover, the centre is expanding its reach into village grass-roots governance. The integration of professional actors and the reinforcement of cleavages between villagers who willingly participate and those who refuse seem to provide additional lessons in the learning process and show policymakers how to strengthen state capacity and improve local implementation.

It remains to be seen whether the central government will succeed in its strategies to continue and facilitate the implementation of a policy that has been unpopular with both rural cadres and large parts of the population. In any case, the strategies have already resulted in a further reduction in local discretion over land use changes in the countryside. As a result, the role of urban planning in the Chinese countryside has increased dramatically, while rural governments are left with less and less of a say in decisions affecting spatial restructuring in their own localities.

Notes

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