The reshaping of social relations: Resettled rural residents in Zhenjiang, China

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A B S T R A C T

Under the banner of integrated urban-rural development in China, increasingly more rural population is being concentrated into large, new residential areas. For resettled residents, the rural-urban transition is rapid and affects multiple facets of their lives. This paper explores the effects of the transition on residents’ social relations, drawing on the experience of resettled villagers in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Province. It addresses three research questions. First, how are such effects manifested in residents’ social interactions and sources of social support? Second, how do such effects vary by socioeconomic attributes of residents? Third, in what ways have residents deployed the spaces of social interaction to enhance their own wellbeing? We show that for resettled rural residents, both the scope and composition of social relations have widened. In particular, those with higher income, increased household assets, or workplace located within the neighborhood are experiencing larger scope of social relations and more diverse subjects of interaction. Our analysis also points to less desirable consequences, as reflected in limited social engagement by residents with fewer financial resources and employment options.

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1. Understanding effects of rural-urban transition on social relations

Rural-urban transition affects residents in both positive and negative ways, while perceptions of such effects may vary by different factors,
such as work access, income level, infrastructure service, and housing environment. On the positive side, in areas where land markets are established, urbanization of rural areas can drive up land value, allowing relocated households to benefit from market gains (Ye & LeGates, 2013). Another commonly cited benefit is better access to infrastructure and public services including healthcare and educational opportunities. Such development can positively impact rural citizens’ lives and lead to a positive outlook on urbanization (Aziz, Hassan, & Saud, 2012; Thongyou, Chamaratana, Phongsiri, & Sosamphanh, 2014). More concerning to policy-makers and planners, however, are the negative perceptions and outcomes. These range from the tangibles, such as health (both physical and psychological) and environmental exposure, to the less tangibles, such as cultural barriers and social disintegration (Sattherthwaite, McGranahan, & Tacoli, 2010; Thongyou, Chamaratana, Phongsiri, & Sosamphanh, 2014; Thuo, 2013; Vorster, 2002).

Changes in social relations are a key feature of such transition. Scholars point to some fundamental distinction between rural and urban communities. While rural living is characterized by strong social networks that often build around the village, urban living is thought to involve less social ties or complex interactions expanding beyond the immediate environment (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Durkheim, 1893; Hazelzet & Wissink, 2012; Young, 2010). In addition, the nature and types of social interaction also vary. Rural communities involve more social relations based on kinship. A rural social interaction model may require more inter-personal dependency because of geographical isolation, often resulting in exchanges among farmers for goods and personal services. As a consequence, rural residents are thought to have a greater sense of responsibility to others, sustaining stronger inter-personal relationships (Hoffreith & Iceland, 2011; Stumpf, 2012).

Residential settings have a substantial impact on residents’ social interactions and perhaps eventual integration into the new living environment. Before transition, the initial setting of rural community itself fosters various relationships out of necessity. This dynamics may have fundamentally changed with the advent of multi-story residential buildings and resettlement communities with shopping areas. Spatially, for instance, the increase in commercial shops reduces the necessity of social interactions based on exchanges of goods/services. Living in apartments far from the ground level further makes it difficult for residents to run a traditional shop house (Hoffreith & Iceland, 2011; Stumpf, 2012).

A study of Chinese farmers’ social ties in resettled areas of Shanghai shows that kinship-based interactions have declined dramatically. Social exchanges with neighbors, on the other hand, have increased and represent the largest number of personal contact. Specifically, such exchanges occurred once or twice a week in rural and semi-urban areas; after the transition to resettlement communities, many residents reported that casual social interaction between neighbors and workmates would occur daily (Xu, Tang, & Chan, 2011). This may be the result of residents’ ability to move from farming-related work to non-agricultural work, allowing for more leisure time and social interaction.

The increase in neighbor relations rather than kinship relations is directly associated with housing. In rural village living, the majority of farmers’ social interactions occurred in farmhouses or private home doorways (Xu & Chan, 2011). In government planned housing districts, residents’ use of space has fundamentally changed: they spend more time socializing in the entranceways of residential buildings, giving them more of an opportunity to interact with neighbors and non-family members. In addition, elderly residents now have increased pensions and leisure time, which they spend in communal areas engaging in clubs and activities like taiji and dancing (Xu & Chan, 2011). Thus, the more populous residential building naturally leads to more frequent social interactions that are more leisure oriented than responsibility related.

To fully understand the impact of resettlement, we also need to consider how social relations are changing overall in the broader context of modernization and urban transformation in China. Under state socialism, the work unit was the center of urban life, encompassing both work and housing and providing an orbit for social interactions with coworkers and friends (Li, 1993; Whyte & Parish, 1984). Recent studies find that the transforming economic landscape has produced a host of relational changes at the individual and family levels, particularly given work-units’ eroding social functions as they no longer provide housing to employees (Hazelzet & Wissink, 2012; Lai, 2001). Residential and economic mobility has led to reduced “strong ties” with kin and coworkers, and increased “weak ties” with friends and others beyond family and the workplace (Ruan, Freeman, Dai, Pan, & Zhang, 1997). Whereas guanxi networks were once the hallmark of urban life with the government providing lifelong employment, weaker ties with friends and neighbors gain heightened importance for employment information in a market economy (Chen & Sun, 2006). Moreover, contemporary commodity housing with few public areas is found to limit the development of social capital, as opposed to more traditional courtyard housing, with implications for continued demolition and redevelopment of older neighborhoods. Relations with newer neighbors have largely not emerged, meaning that social networks may be much more dispersed (Hazelzet & Wissink, 2012, Wang, Zhang, & Wu, 2016).

The resettled residents, therefore, can be seen as facing the effects of both forced urbanization and large societal transformation. The general literature, however, shows no deep probing of how residents of different demographic segments may experience the impact of rural-urban transition. Specifically, what is the influence of such socioeconomic attributes as age, gender, education, and income? In addition, given the top-down nature of resettlement in China, there are often planned elements in the new residential environment. These can be in the form of both physical space (e.g. community centers) and social space (e.g. neighborhood organizational structure). How do residents deploy such spaces for their own wellbeing? Our research will provide new insights on these questions, as related to the effects of rural-urban transition on the (re)configuration of residents’ social relations.

2. Research setting and methodology

The study is situated in the context of China’s recent shift towards integrated urban-rural development, in which planning is one of the key instruments. The 2008 national Urban and Rural Planning Act revised the traditional urban-biased planning framework. Prior to this Act, the urban core and suburban districts formed the ‘planned urban area,’ whereas counties beyond the suburban areas were defined as rural areas. With the Act, rural areas for the first time would be included in the formal master planning system and that the ‘city-region’ would become the spatial context for planning (Qian & Wong, 2012). Beyond the new planning framework, urban-rural integrated development also relates to public finance, local administration, social systems, and household registration policies.

Jiangsu Province, in which our case city Zhenjiang is located, has played a major role in pioneering rural development in recent decades. Situated in the east coast region and along the lower Yangtze River, Jiangsu ranks high among the most developed provinces in China. Known for its “Sunan model” of township and village enterprises, Jiangsu was among the first to develop strategies for coordinating industry and agriculture in rural areas. With expanding rural industries but limited rural land, and with concerns over food security at both provincial and national levels, the need for spatial planning of the countryside came to be seen as imperative. Rural land zoning was introduced in the mid-1990s to create buffers between agriculture and industry, following a decision to adapt rational urban planning principles to the organization of rural land use (Bray, 2013).

In 2012, for the first time, the Zhenjiang Municipal Government created an integrated urban and rural master plan. With a 20-year horizon, the Plan not only considers urban and rural sectors in a coordinated fashion, it also reaches beyond the traditional master plan to emphasize...
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