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The Great Urban Leap? On the Local Political Economy of Rural Urbanisation in China

Elena MEYER-CLEMENT

Abstract: This paper provides insights into the local political economy of China's current *in situ* urbanisation as compared to the 1980s and 1990s, focusing on the role played by county and township governments in shaping urbanisation in their localities. Marked differences were observed in the extent to which local cadres are able to steer the urbanisation process and adapt the relevant policies to local conditions and demands of the population. If leading county and township cadres are able to assert a relatively autonomous position vis-à-vis the superior municipality, a rural urbanisation process that considers both urban and rural interests and integrates local economic initiatives seems to become a potential alternative to the prevailing city-centred urban expansionism.

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Keywords: China, urbanisation, local cadres, rural areas

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Introduction

After the wave of rural industrialisation in the 1980s and early 1990s and the corresponding growth of rural market towns, the Chinese countryside is once again being transformed at a dizzying pace. Cities and towns are expanding rapidly, and villages are being merged into new rural communities, which are intended to serve as pre-urbanisation facilities at the grass-roots level. The community-building drive by local governments has already been termed the “Great Urban Leap” (城镇化的大跃进, *chengzhenhua de da yuejin*) by observers and participants (Liu 2012; Johnson 2013). This choice of words, referring to the economically and socially devastating Maoist campaign of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), points to a dramatic turnaround in Chinese urbanisation policies for the countryside. In contrast to the policies favouring local initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s, the recent rural-urbanisation policy that has developed in the course of the central policy framework for “Building a New Socialist Countryside” (BNSC, 建设社会主义新农村, *jianshe shehui zhuyi xin nongcun*) is often perceived as evincing a draconian top-down approach, characterised by coercion, disorderly economic management and ad hoc measures to change the living conditions of peasants. However, there is a deep divergence in the ways that rural urbanisation is being carried out on the ground. Some localities engage in urbanisation, or “population concentration”, merely in order to economise on construction land, which, in turn, allows the superior municipality to further expand; in other localities, population concentration is connected to various local development strategies based on the transference of farmland usage rights to commercial agricultural companies and rural cooperatives. In some places, even specific, comprehensive local development concepts are sketched out for the entire rural territory.

In China today, most prefectural cities have extensive territories under their administration, including vast rural areas, and the institutions of land management and urban planning clearly place the provincial and prefectural governments in a dominant position in the field of urbanisation politics (see, in detail, Hsing 2010). This institutional dominance of the urban governments may explain the focus on population concentration and land savings in many rural community-building projects. However, as the above examples suggest, in other rural areas, a more decentralised urbanisation approach seems to have crystallised, which combines projects for population concentration

with local economic development strategies and thus engages in actual urbanisation on the spot. This article argues that a full explanation for this variation has still not been found and that local socio-economic conditions alone are not responsible for the different modes of rural urbanisation that can be observed in China today. Drawing on fieldwork conducted by the author in five county-level entities in the provinces of Henan and Anhui in September 2012 and March 2013, it is instead argued that a significant role in shaping rural urbanisation in China is played by the group of leading county and township cadres and the specific positions of power that they hold within the political system.

Numerous Chinese newspaper articles and internet blogs depict individual local government behaviour in the context of the current urbanisation drive in the countryside (see, for example, Liu 2012; Guo 2012 and Yu 2013); other examples can be found in Hillman and Unger (2013), Yew (2012) and to some extent in Hsing (2010: ch.6), Lin (2009: ch.9) and McGee et al. (2007: ch.8). However, a systematic analysis of the role played by the local state in implementing the recent urbanisation policies in the countryside has yet to be carried out. This article¹ contributes to filling this gap by combining approaches to policy implementation in China with approaches to intergovernmental relations in order to show how provincial strategies for rural development and the strategic efforts of leading county and township cadres to exploit their room to manoeuvre in policy implementation result in varying degrees of political discretion and relative political autonomy in the county and township governments vis-à-vis the upper-level governments, and how this variation in relative political autonomy can explain the different modes of rural urbanisation.

1 This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the “Governance, Adaptability and System Stability under Contemporary One-Party Rule: Comparative Perspectives” conference, 27–29 March 2014, in Nanchang, China. The author would like to thank Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert for their helpful comments, along with the conference participants for the fruitful discussion of the paper. Special thanks also go to the two anonymous reviewers for their straightforward and very helpful comments on the manuscript. The author is grateful to the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research for funding this research in the context of the “Governance in China” research network (grant number 01UC1011B).

The next section examines the existing literature on rural urbanisation in China and shows how today's version of rural urbanisation differs from developments in the 1980s and 1990s with regard to the role played by the local state. It argues for approaching Chinese urbanisation in rural areas from the perspective of rural political-economic developments rather than applying urban-centred spatial frameworks and distinguishes between territorial settings characterised by the weak and strong relative political autonomy of county and township governments in urbanisation politics. The following two sections provide a detailed account of these two cases based on the fieldwork; this account suggests that rural territories where the county and township governments have weak relative political autonomy are dominated by the expansion of nearby municipalities, while rural territories where the county and township governments have strong relative political autonomy have developed a new version of rural *in situ* urbanisation.

Rural Urbanisation in the Shadow of Urban Expansionism

In situ (就地, *jiudi*) urbanisation (Zhu 1999), or rural urbanisation, has become a widely accepted specific feature of Chinese urbanisation since the 1990s, when a real boom phase of urbanisation occurred in rural areas (see Fei et al. 1986; Guldin 1997, 1992; and, for more recent accounts, see Zhu 2002; Fan, Heberer and Taubmann 2006; McGee et al. 2007; Lin 2009; Hsing 2010). Most of the literature agrees on the fact that, above all, socialist legacies and the specific conditions of the early reform process can be held responsible for the intensive development of this type of urbanisation in the 1990s. Explanations include the gradual relaxing of restrictions on migration to small towns and the continuing restrictions on migration to large cities; the gradual character of the market reforms, which only allowed for the establishment of small private enterprises and of rural township and village enterprises (TVEs); the political promotion of TVE development; new opportunities to attract foreign investment; and the re-ranking of the criteria for designating towns. In the wake of the administrative decentralisation measures granting more decision-making powers to local governments, most authors, moreover, attest to the key initiatives launched by local governments to promote

rural industrialisation, which became the main catalyst for rural urbanisation during the 1980s and 1990s. But how did the story of rural urbanisation proceed following the decline of the TVEs and many of the omnipresent rural development zones towards the end of the 1990s? First and foremost, the institutional environment of the Chinese urbanisation process had changed substantially – in particular, the implementation of the policy of “city administering county” (市管县, *shi guan xian*) on a wider scale in the 1990s had led not only to the formation of more city regions comprised of large rural areas, but also to a shift in control over rural resources from rural to urban governments. Hsing You-tien (2010: 94–98) presents a set of legal and administrative institutions that have effectively empowered the municipal governments to become the major designers of the transformation of the rural landscape. These include the land-tenure system, which allows for the requisition of rural collective land; the new land-management regime, which was introduced in the mid-1980s and makes the land-management bureaus at municipal and district levels the exclusive representatives of the state and responsible for making land-use plans, setting quotas for construction land and licensing farmland conversion; and the system of quota allocations for construction land, which clearly benefits urban governments. Furthermore, urban development plans are often designed to legitimise further urban expansion, and together with the new political appreciation of urban development, a “new model of urbanisation” (McGee et al. 2007) eventually took shape. No matter whether seen through the lens of “a regime of accumulation and legitimation founded on land rents” (Hsing 2010: 114) or of local strategies for developing more coordinated plans for economic development and land use (McGee et al. 2007: 162–164), this new urbanisation describes a spatially more centralised agglomeration and city-centred urbanisation that normally takes the form of urban expansion or urban sprawl – defined by Yew Chiew Ping, in the context of China, as the phenomenon that emerges “when the pace of urban spatial expansion overtakes that of urbanisation understood as ‘population concentration’, resulting in the inefficient consumption of land” (Yew 2012: 284) – at the cost of rural initiatives (Hsing 2010; McGee et al. 2007). Accordingly, the notion that “bottom-up rural development” (Zhu 2002) is one of the causes of rural urbanisation is no longer viable.

This does not, however, mark the end of the story for Chinese rural urbanisation. In particular, the “dramatic shift in the perception of rural issues” (Day 2013: 92) that led to the prominent position of the peasantry in the discussion on rural China as crystallised in the official adoption of the “three rural issues” (三农问题, *san nong wenti*) in the early 2000s contributed to the spreading of a new kind of rural agglomeration, which is not independent of urban expansion, but follows a different political dynamic. Local experiments that saved farmland for rural industry by reducing the space for rural settlements, and concepts such as the “three concentrations” (三个集中, *san ge jizhong*), which call for the pooling of farmland for large-scale agricultural operations, the concentration of rural factories in industrial zones and the concentration of the rural population in more urbanised and more compact settlements, gained new relevance as responses to the rural crisis (Bray 2013) and were included in the central policy framework of BNSC. After October 2006, in particular, when the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee called, quite specifically, not only for the development of urban communities, but also for the construction of rural communities (农村社区, *nongcun shequ*) in order to improve public-service provision and social management at the grass roots (CCP Central Committee 2006), rural *in situ* urbanisation became a central policy focus within the BNSC framework. As a consequence, the Ministry of Civil Affairs began to select “experimental points” (试点, *shidian*), or trial sites, for testing the new policy (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2008), and in October 2009, proceeded to select model units for experimenting with the nationwide coverage of building rural communities, with their number being increased at regular intervals (Ministry of Civil Affairs Office 2009).

The intensified efforts to carry urbanisation into the villages have already been labelled a “new mode and new phase of urbanisation” (Bray 2013: 57), because instead of concentrating on the expansion of urban agglomerations, rural urbanisation today rather seems to apply urban planning to villages, seeking to introduce an urban lifestyle to rural areas. When compared with the rural urbanisation of the 1980s and 1990s, the specific characteristics of the new approach become evident: With regard to geographical dispersal, today’s rural urbanisation is not limited to areas close to urban centres, but is promoted vigorously even in the mainly agricultural regions that are not usually

disposed to accepting urbanisation. With regard to the motivational origins, today's urbanisation is not primarily a bottom-up development merely picked up and further promoted by the central government; its spread can instead be attributed to its being included in central policy frameworks. Finally, with regard to urbanisation dynamics, today's rural urbanisation does not result from population concentration or from industrialisation, but rather concentrates the population in the expectation or hope of further agglomeration and urbanisation in the long term and is envisaged as spurring economic development by vacating land and extensively converting rural land-use rights. Precisely these differences, however, render the approach highly problematic. As has been reported in several Chinese newspaper articles and blog entries and was confirmed in the author's interviews with local cadres, there are, first and foremost, major financial problems, because implementation is heavily reliant on local government budgets and the villagers' own savings; villagers usually have to pay for the new houses and for parts of the new public services themselves. As the existing literature (see above) and the author's own fieldwork suggests, in many places, the approach also lacks economic sustainability and threatens to impoverish former peasants who have lost their land-use rights in the process, because the locational advantages for an economic development alternative to agriculture as well as the expertise in operating large agricultural businesses are lacking. Often, no further infrastructure is being built in and around the new communities that could provide alternative employment opportunities (Guo 2012; Yu 2013). Finally, high levels of tension between cadres and populations has resulted from the widespread conflicts over compensation payments and government attempts to motivate or even force villagers to demolish their old houses and move into the new apartments. The full impact of the new urbanisation process on rural society cannot yet be predicted, but it is expected to be tremendous since many peasants are, as Hsing Youtien describes it, "deterritorialised: they lose land, livelihood, networks of social support and collective identities" (Hsing 2010: 185).

As a result of the widespread obstacles, some provinces have already begun to downsize their goals for rural community-building. One prominent example of this is found in Henan Province, which has been reported as no longer allowing the building of rural communities beyond the planning areas of cities, meaning that, in the

future, rural communities can be built only on the urban fringes (Yu 2013). Nevertheless, it seems beyond dispute that some kind of rural urbanisation, including new community-building in rural areas, will continue since it represents the rare convergence of central and local interests: The 2002 tax reform and the abolition of the agricultural tax in 2006 created holes in local government budgets, which were often filled by means of land appropriation. In recent years, moreover, village housing sites (宅基地, *zhaijidi*) have gained attention as a new land resource, and the process of vacating land by moving villagers to new rural communities, central villages or expanding market towns has become a much favoured strategy, embodying the promise, as it does, of generating income flows for the prefectures, counties and townships and, at the same time, meeting important political targets regarding village redevelopment, rural development and land politics. Nonetheless, in light of the recent developments that seem to indicate a trend towards stopping the government-led *in situ* urbanisation drive in rural areas and relegating rural community-building to the area of urban planning, the question remains as to how much this really represents a new type of urbanisation compared with the “new model of urbanisation” based on urban expansion described above. Does the role of local cadres in implementing the former differ from the role they played in the latter? Is it not the case that the urban governments are still the real designers of today’s rural urbanisation?

Most recent studies examine China’s urbanisation from an urban perspective, which is reinforced by the spatial frameworks they adopt. T. G. McGee et al. (2007), for example, look at four concentric circles around the city centre characterised by an increasing percentage of agricultural employment. Hsing You-tien (2010) also follows the spatial logic of urban expansionism, but the merit of her work is that she links land politics to local state dynamics by viewing the local state as the “territorialisation of state power” (Hsing 2010: 8). Urbanisation becomes “an active spatial force shaping the power process of the local state” (Hsing 2010: 10), and the development of land becomes the main battlefield for the state and societal actors involved. From an urban perspective, however, the local governments on the rural fringe of municipalities appear to be mere objects of municipal power. The township governments, for example, are first and foremost seen as being under pressure to help the municipal governments with their expansion strategies by negotiating the clearing of collective land for

development with village leaders (Hsing 2010: ch.6). This way of viewing the situation is only a partial treatment of the political agency of governments below the prefectural level. In the following, by contrast, the focus is on the political agency of rural local governments below the prefectural cities in different territorial settings. Meg Rithmire recently pointed to the variations that exist in the local states' territorial control in Chinese cities and distinguished between cases of "territorial consolidation" (when "the local state has established itself as the sole authority over the use, occupation and allocation of urban territory") and "territorial fragmentation" (when the local state has relinquished some of its territorial control to other groups) (Rithmire 2013: 880–881). Rithmire's expansion of Hsing's argument on territoriality to include those variations can be used to flesh out a "rural perspective" on urbanisation that considers rural political-economic conditions as key to understanding urbanisation developments; it can be assumed that there is not only inter-urban variation in territorial control, but also inter-rural variation. Rural governments have had varied success in controlling rural territories in the course of urbanisation. In many places, they have had to share or even hand over much territorial control to municipal governments.

Literature on policy implementation in China not only shows how government institutions shape local government behaviour (see, e.g., Oi 1999; Huang 1996; Whiting 2001; Edin 2003), but, more recently, has also revealed important insights into local government practices and the political dynamics within the local state (see, e.g., Smith 2009; Hillman 2010; Zhou 2010; Heberer and Schubert 2012; Kostka and Hobbs 2012; Ahlers and Schubert 2013). In order to substantiate the argument on the variations in rural governments' territorial control in the context of urbanisation, this article locates itself in between these two perspectives and looks at the positioning of county- and township-level governments in territorial settings characterised by different intergovernmental power relations. As R. A. W. Rhodes (1981) pointed out in his "power-dependence" model of intergovernmental relations, in these relations, both the dependence between government organisations and the strategies of the "dominant coalitions" within the organisations to regulate the dependence are of particular concern (Rhodes 1981: ch.5), because "no-one regulates central–local relations except the participants" (Rhodes 1981: 111). In the case of the Chinese local state, research has, in fact,

shown how “factions” (Hillman 2010) and collusion between party and government personnel and their friends and relatives (Smith 2009; Zhou 2010) may influence decision-making.

From a group perspective, Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert suggest that leading county and township cadres in China constitute a “strategic group” – “a group of actors who develop strategies for securing or pushing through group-related interests” (Heberer and Schubert 2012: 225) – and that the “leadership core” of the strategic group of leading county and township cadres coordinates and unifies the group’s behaviour (Heberer and Schubert 2012: 226). Within this analytical concept, one of the main goals of the group’s strategic agency is to maintain or strengthen its “relative political autonomy” within the political system – that is, their room to manoeuvre in policy implementation between upper-level requirements and local demands and for developing and maintaining a specific identity, because this “serves to maintain and strengthen their relative power” (Heberer and Schubert 2012: 227). Rhodes, too, conceptualises varying degrees of discretion that any government organisation, or the dominant coalition within a government organisation, can exercise (Rhodes 1981: 98–99). Relative political autonomy and discretion are usually the outcome of strategic agency in the form of goal-setting and the choice of resources within the institutional constraints. In this article, however, relative political autonomy is treated as an explanatory variable, because it is assumed that varying degrees of relative political autonomy correspond to varying degrees of territorial control, and that this variation is an important factor in understanding different modes of urbanisation in China’s rural areas.

In general, Chinese municipal governments have, without doubt, become major designers in the transformation of the rural landscape. By means of the authority they wield within the land-management system and in urban planning, they control the main resources and determine the crucial conditions for the political agency of lower-level governments in land politics. However, the latter may still be able to maintain degrees of relative political autonomy that differ from those held by the municipal governments, and this seems to have a strong impact on how urbanisation is organised politically on the ground. In the following sections of this article, the urbanisation goals that have developed within government organisations at different administrative levels from the provinces down to the townships

and the relative power of the county and township governments in implementing *in situ* urbanisation will be identified in the two cases of strong and weak relative political autonomy of county and township governments in the context of urbanisation and land politics. County and township governments have gained “strong relative political autonomy” in intergovernmental relations when the dominant coalition has set its own local goals of urbanisation and land usage and can deploy resources to pursue them within the institutional constraints of the land-management system. The “weak relative political autonomy” of county and township governments, in contrast, denotes a situation in which no specific local goals for urbanisation and land usage are set and/or the dominant coalition is not able to bargain with upper-level governments for the relevant resources in support of localised *in situ* urbanisation and rural development. Juxtaposed against the two prevailing forms of urbanisation in rural China today – urban expansion and *in situ* urbanisation – the differentiation between strong and weak relative political autonomy can provide insights into the political economy and the complex local state dynamics behind China’s rural urbanisation.

Weak Relative Political Autonomy of Local Governments in the Context of Urban Expansion

In light of the municipal governments’ dominance over land politics within their territorial domain and the unrelenting urban expansionism, the rural fringe of municipalities is in most cases characterised by the weak relative autonomy of county and township governments (see, e.g., Hsing 2010: ch.6 and 7). However, as the next section will show, the mere geographical proximity to a municipality is not decisive in determining such a power relationship; the specific strategies of county and township government actors may still allow county and township governments to pursue their own urbanisation goals. The following case of two townships in a suburbanised former county town in Bozhou Municipality, Anhui Province shows in detail how the struggle for relative political autonomy and an individual approach to urbanisation can be lost if resources are lacking and strategies are developed too late.

Urbanisation Goals

Anhui Province had been a pioneer in experimenting with rural communities in the early 2000s, and in 2012, it announced a specific local development model called “Building Beautiful Villages” (BBV), which strives for all-encompassing integrated urban and rural development as enunciated in the official goal to realise beautification in terms of “ecological, habitable villages, enriched lives and civilised and harmonious customs” (生态宜居村庄美、兴业富民生活美、文明和谐乡风美, *shengtai yijū cūnzhuāng mei, xīngyè fùmín shēnghuó mei, wénmíng héxié xiāngfēng mei*) (Anhui People’s Government 2012). Interestingly enough, instead of rural communities, central villages (中心村, *zhōngxīn cūn*) were adopted as the units for rural agglomeration and rural service provision within this framework, but both terms denote new, larger communities integrating several administrative villages in the course of rural-land conversion. In any case, in 2013, when the concept of “new rural communities” (新型农村社区, *xīnxíng nóngcūn shèqū*) prevailed among central policymakers, Anhui also had to declare specific goals for building new rural communities: Since 2013, the province has annually selected 10 counties, 120 townships and 1,500 villages as trial sites (Wang and Chen 2013).

Bozhou Municipality had, since 2008, begun to reorganise and merge market towns, administrative villages and natural villages into the new three layers of market town communities (集镇社区, *jízhèn shèqū*), central villages (中心村, *zhōngxīn cūn*) and basic villages (基层村, *jīcéng cūn*), which all point towards population concentration and village and town redevelopment. In November 2013, according to the new provincial plans, the municipality additionally proclaimed the annual selection of eight townships and 120 villages as trial sites for building rural communities (Bozhou Municipal Committee Office and Municipal Government Office 2013). The mixture of different urbanisation concepts led to some confusion among local cadres, and the distinction between central villages and new rural communities remained blurred, as the author’s interviews with township cadres revealed (see, also, Jiusan Society Anhui Province Committee 2013). One rural township visited in March 2013, for example, had during recent years turned an administrative village into a market town and then expanded it to become a central market town with several new districts (新区, *xīn qū*), but was now waiting for the town to be approved as one of two rural communities. The deputy party secretary

commented on the term changes as follows: “Strictly speaking, there is not much difference between the terms [rural] community and [administrative] village for our villages” (Anonymous 1 2013), suggesting that otherwise not much had changed.

The county-level city of Qiaocheng had been suburbanised in 2002, and as an urban district, its goals and activities had become more dependent on the interests of the municipal cadres (on this dependency in general, see Lam and Lo 2010). For some years, the municipal government had already used the district government to help implement its urban-expansion policy by appropriating village construction land for urban usage. With the BBV programme, ironically, this practice intensified and was put on a stable legal basis, because it was connected with the state policy of “interlocking the regulation of urban and rural construction land” (城乡建设用地增减挂钩, *chengxiang jianshe yongdi zengjian guagou*), which allows for urban expansion only if at least the same area of rural construction land is being recultivated in order to maintain the overall farmland ratio. At the same time, the BBV policy also intensified the goals for village redevelopment and building new villages and for the promotion of the rural economy. This posed a dilemma for the leading district cadres, because as a result of the municipality’s hunger for land, resources for this additional task were scarce. However, they did not develop any local urbanisation or development goals that could have competed with the municipality’s extraction of construction-land quota. By contrast, as leaders of the only urban district of the municipality, the district cadres had already, to some extent, developed an identity as urban cadres, which specifically included bearing responsibility for the successful implementation of urban-expansion projects (Anonymous 2 2013).

Local Cadres’ Relative Power in Implementing *in situ* Urbanisation

The transformation into an urban district had substantially changed the rules of the game for the Qiaocheng government. The municipal government had gained financial and personnel resources over the district, and when the BBV policy came into effect in 2012, the district did not have any means available to confront the municipality’s intensified extraction of the construction-land quota. In the year 2012 alone, the district provided 4,240 *mu* (亩) (approximately 283 hec-

tares; one *mu* is equivalent to 667 square metres or 1/15 hectare) for the municipality, which was used for a new industrial park, compared with only 3,746 *mu* that were left over for district development; furthermore, 1,713 *mu* of these had to be used for villager resettlement (Qiaocheng District Land Bureau 2012). Villager resettlement was consuming ever-larger areas, because most of the idle patches of the land in the villages had been used up and the BBV policy emphasised building new villages. However, the municipality left most of this burden to the district and in 2012, for example, contributed only 409 *mu* towards new housing sites (Qiaocheng District Land Bureau 2012).

In accordance with central guidelines on land policy, Anhui's BBV policy demands an annual increase in the farmland quota. In Bozhou, as in most municipalities, the corresponding increase in construction-land quota, the so-called "interlocked quota" (挂钩指标, *guagou zhibiao*), is mainly used for urban development, but in order to maintain the promotion of village redevelopment and increase the incentives for rural cadres to build new villages, a recent amendment to the BBV policy now requires at least 10 per cent of the newly obtained construction-land quota to be used for local BBV projects (Qiaocheng District Land Bureau n.d.). The province also provided for a financial bonus to be paid for every *mu* of recultivated land, which in 2013 amounted to 42,000 CNY (about 5,200 EUR), and at least half of this money was supposed to be invested in village infrastructure projects (Qiaocheng District Land Bureau n.d.). The money was shared between the district and the township, but, in practice, the townships could receive larger portions in order to intensify their construction of new districts and rural communities within the BBV framework (Anonymous 3 2013). One of the townships visited, which was further away from the city, depended heavily on the bonus. Villagers could be asked to contribute up to 15 CNY (about 1.80 EUR) per household to the projects, and the district government provided another 50,000 CNY (about 6,200 EUR) for all the projects, but the main part of the work, including road repairs, sewer construction, sewage treatment, garbage disposal, road lighting, greening, and so on, along with villager compensation, was obtained by vacating land for the city. Applications for a construction-land quota to promote local industry, which would have led to larger budgets, were unpromising (Anonymous 1 2013). The province did not envisage

scattered, bottom-up development, but coordinated, strategic development sketched out by the municipalities, and in Bozhou's development plan, the particular township was destined for the recultivation of construction land rather than for local industrial development. In a personal interview, the township deputy party secretary acknowledged that since the implementation of the BBV policy, land supervision and upper-level involvement in matters of township development had increased considerably (Anonymous 1 2013).

The diminishing land for industrial development and the limited budget for rural-development projects have made rural urbanisation around Bozhou almost unsustainable, because it is generally built on the expectation of future new employment opportunities in the new town districts or communities. The local cadres were well aware of the difficulties:

For example, [our town of X], we built this rural community well, people from ten and eight *li* [five and four kilometres; one *li* (里) is equivalent to 500 metres] away all want to come to live here. The living conditions are good, so they want to live here, but if I still have to go back home to work, to my land seven or eight *li* away [...]. Living here and then going back home to work – they certainly do not want to do this. So we need to solve the employment problem (Anonymous 1 2013).

A leading cadre in the District Land Bureau admitted that because of the “interlocked quota” “it is impossible to fulfil every township's economic development” (Anonymous 2 2013), and in an internal document, the Bureau even criticised the rural-urbanisation approach based on the recultivation of land. Among other things, it was pointed out that the financial yields from the quota exchange were insufficient to pay for all the necessary construction work. However, since there were no formal means available for the district and township governments to resolve the deadlock, the Land Bureau could only informally adjust the quota in order to cover up the widespread illegal land use for construction in the villages. The Bureau's own land management, which included land-supervision cores (土地监察队, *tudi jiancha dui*) for seeking out cases of illegal land use, was strictly controlled by the upper-level land administration – for example, once each year the Bureau's investigations were rechecked against maps from the central satellite-monitoring system of land use (Anonymous 2 2013) – and was also part of the annual performance evaluation.

Nonetheless, as the cadre pointed out during the interview, the Land Bureau believed that, although the peasants were engaging in illegal land usage, they were also simply fulfilling the demands of the latest BBV policies, by building new houses and developing the local economy (Anonymous 2 2013). However, the informal, hands-off approach to illegal land use clearly revealed the weak relative political autonomy of the district government. As a consequence, the township cadres had to undertake the work of expropriating the collective land and resettling the villagers despite the fact that they also considered the municipality's demolition and resettlement policy to be unfair and had serious doubts about the sustainability of the city-centred rural-urbanisation approach (Anonymous 4 2013).

Strong Relative Political Autonomy of Local Governments in Pursuing *in situ* Urbanisation

Cases of local governments with strong relative political autonomy are more widespread farther away from larger cities, where the municipal governments may exert pressure on the local county and township cadres to urbanise, but may otherwise, to a great extent, allow them to use their own discretion. However, even leading cadres in territories close to a city may succeed in strategically affecting urbanisation policy in favour of their own interests. Examples of these different cases are found in two counties within Kaifeng Municipality visited by the author in September 2012, and in one county in Anyang Municipality visited in March 2013; both municipalities are in Henan Province.

Urbanisation Goals

When *in situ* urbanisation became a central policy focus within the BNSC framework, Henan strongly embraced the idea, and in the following years developed a “new urbanisation” (新型城镇化, *xinxing chengzhenhua*) strategy, which was primarily aimed at the development of small towns and rural market places and the building of “new rural communities”. In September 2011, the State Council accredited this approach (State Council 2011), and the municipalities were subsequently given a specific number of rural communities to be completed by 2012. In order to guarantee the meeting of the provincial goals,

and possibly to achieve some political objectives on the way, the prefectures began to set over-ambitious local goals for rural community-building. In 2012, for example, Kaifeng Municipality ordered each of its 97 townships to build at least one rural community containing at least 50 apartment houses by the end of the year, with at least one rural community in each county to be composed of at least 1,000 households. In order to enforce these demands, the “one-item veto rule” (一票否决, *yipiao fonjue*) was applied to the performance goals, meaning that failure would result in the dismissal of the relevant officials (Kaifeng Municipal Party Committee and Kaifeng Municipal Government 2012). Placed under such heavy political pressure, but otherwise left with a great deal of leeway regarding the fulfilment of the demands for implementation, the county and township cadres tried in all manner of different ways to meet the municipality’s goal of building at least one community per township. As even a brief internet search reveals, however, these efforts resulted in violent incidents over land expropriation and compensation issues in many places, including the counties of Lankao and Tongxu, which were visited by the author in September 2012, and eventually prompted the provincial government to abandon the whole idea of building rural communities beyond urban-planning areas in September 2013, as mentioned above (Liu 2012; Yu 2013).

Anyang Municipality, which is economically much better off than Kaifeng, even demanded that the townships build at least three rural communities, but otherwise emphasised the necessity of planning by the counties and envisaged coordinated development from those projected rural communities closer to cities towards the ones farther away from cities (Jiang 2012). The county of Tangyin, visited in March 2013, was located close to the municipality and had undergone impressive industrial development in recent years: The output value of the industrial sector had risen between 15 and 20 per cent, and in 2012 the urbanisation level reached close to 39 per cent (Tangyin County Party Committee and Tangyin County People’s Government n.d.). In 2012 the county government envisaged the merging of the county’s 298 administrative villages into 72 rural communities and sketched out a detailed schedule for the building of approximately 40 communities by 2015, which would save approximately 20,000 *mu* of land. Each village had to make plans for rural community-building that year, and in 2013 each township had to

fulfil more than half of its building tasks (Tangyin County Party Committee and Tangyin County People's Government 2012). The county gave the townships some leeway in choosing different types of communities – that is, whether government-led, market-oriented, village–company cooperations, self-built by the villagers or built with government help. The county also suggested different numbers of inhabitants and sizes of buildings for different areas. However, the several documents issued on the matter left no doubt that, all in all, the county government was in charge. In contrast to the decentralised approach in the counties under Kaifeng, Tangyin County strictly regulated many of the details, ranging from land use, compensation and house selection to the basic facilities that were to be built.

Local Cadres' Relative Power in Implementing *in situ* Urbanisation

The political pressure applied by the Henan provincial government to build a specific number of rural communities by the end of the year and the emphasis on township and village planning in the context of rural community-building (National Development and Reform Commission 2012) generally constrained the municipalities' urban expansionism. In Kaifeng, for example, this translated into municipal requirements to make at least some of the land saved by community-building available for local industrial development (Anonymous 5 2012). Accordingly, the exchange in resources between the prefectural and the lower-level governments in the context of the urbanisation policy in Henan was not generally characterised by the exchange of land quota for bonus payments, as described in the case of Anhui above, but much more often by the exchange of fulfilled political goals for political awards or at least exemption from punishment (see also Table 1 below). The information and the means to implement the provincial-level policies comprised the major resources of the county and township governments in this context.

One consequence of the emphasis on meeting political goals was that provincial bonus payments for land savings played a lesser role in local finances in Kaifeng than in Bozhou (Anhui Province). In the counties and townships under Kaifeng that were visited, this led to major difficulties in financing the building of the communities and providing sufficient compensation for the villagers. Individual communities had already started to be built as BNSC trial sites and were

receiving the relevant funding, but in other places project funds were rare, and the application process was often too slow for the implementation schedule that had been stipulated. The lack of basic facilities obviously made it very difficult for the township and village cadres to persuade villagers to buy apartments and demolish their old houses. As a result, the townships usually tried to raise loans – which is not officially allowed, but was still possible for some via their restaurants and other companies (Anonymous 6 2012) – or they made use of the informal land market. One township in Lankao, for example, appropriated 100 *mu* of village land to build the first houses and to start the resettlement, and was then planning to sell the quota of 400 *mu* of village land to be vacated to a developer in order to pay for the resettlement and the future building (Anonymous 7 2012). This model was only possible in areas close to the county seat, however, where the land was of value to developers and where most villagers had already desisted from farming.

In addition to the creative methods of raising funds for the building of the communities, the county and township cadres also used their political room to manoeuvre to find ways to develop the local economy and create new employment opportunities, because they understood how closely such opportunities were connected with the willingness and capability of the villagers to move, and thus their own ability to meet the goals of the upper levels. As a township head in Tongxu concisely concluded, “Peasants who come to live here cannot possibly go back to farming. The income from farming is not even close to sufficient” (Anonymous 7 2012). The decentralised approach allowed for much consideration of specific local conditions and existing local initiatives, and also generated additional motivation for the local cadres to pursue community-building despite the obvious hardships. A deputy director of the Agricultural Commission in Tongxu County expressed his enthusiasm as follows:

Only when we build the communities well, demolish the old villages and vacate the land will there be local construction and industrial enterprises. Now, on the farmland, there is no way to do it, but when the old villages are demolished, we will be able to recultivate one part. [...] Both agriculture and industry are carried forward by urban building! (Anonymous 6 2012)

Even villages were provided with support to pursue their own development strategies, as long as these did not violate the required envir-

onmental standards. However, local conditions were not always favourable for industrial development. In general, the poorer agricultural regions around Kaifeng experienced great difficulty in attracting investors for larger eco-friendly industries, and localities that mainly relied on grain cultivation had trouble even attracting any investors for commercialised agriculture. This threatened to hamper the sustainability of the rural community projects and their attractiveness for villagers, making the process of persuading them to move even more difficult. Some localities even used parts of the original compensation money to entice companies into investing, which further reduced the amount of compensation available for the population and aggravated the tensions between cadres and populations that arose in connection with rural community-building (Anonymous 7 2012). The weak resources for economic development also endangered the future provision of public services. The county cadres in the government agencies responsible knew that they would hardly be able to sustain service provision in the communities (Anonymous 8 2012), and the townships were already planning to privatise public services (Anonymous 6 2012).

The case of Kaifeng shows that county and township governments freed from the shadow of urban expansionism generally have stronger relative political autonomy regarding the implementation of rural urbanisation, which enables or even requires them to extensively adapt the upper level's policies to local conditions and draft their own local urbanisation and development plans. This does not, of course, make things any easier for the local cadres, and in the localities visited, many were, in fact, struggling with the implementation – either directly, when villagers could not be persuaded to move and protests accumulated, or indirectly, when it had already become obvious that the projects were not sustainable and future cadre–population tensions were looming. The decentralised approach to *in situ* urbanisation seems to instigate such difficulties. However, the following case will show that the same urbanisation mode can also have more sustainable effects on rural development when the county government plays a more active role in strengthening its relative political autonomy and has a stronger capacity to guide and steer *in situ* urbanisation in its territory (see also Table 1 below).

Tangyin County, in Anyang Municipality, had pursued its own development strategy based on rural agglomeration long before the

latest requirements for rural community-building were announced in 2012. Located advantageously on China's north–south route and long known for its agricultural products, the county had, in the early 2000s, begun to vigorously promote its industrial development by concentrating the food industry in zones, saving land and offering preferential treatment for private companies regarding land prices, tax and administrative formalities. The development gained further momentum and was even entitled the “Tangyin phenomenon” (汤阴现象, *Tangyin xianxiang*), when new bureaucratic work methods were introduced: An elaborate project-management system concentrated the responsibility for any large project in the hands of one leading county cadre and considerably reduced the formalities and potential obstacles for the companies. The companies also no longer had to think about land expropriation or deal with any functional departments themselves. In weekly meetings, the main development strategies were discussed, and extensive performance-accountability measures were introduced for the bureaucracy in order to increase efficiency (Zhang and Song 2013). These self-installed institutions increased the county's relative power vis-à-vis the municipality, because they maintained an incoming flow of resources, and they ensured continuous independent goal-setting. Both these developments reinforced the path towards strong relative political autonomy. The downside was the response of the prefectural government of Anyang, which had increased the requirements for matching funds (配套资金, *peitao zijin*) (on the deliberate alteration of matching funds by prefectures, see also Ahlers and Schubert 2014). This was perceived as a source of great pressure at the time of the visit, because in recent years the county had had to shoulder the budget for most of the projects alone (Anonymous 9 2013).

The political pressure to engage in rural community-building connected with scarce funding and little leeway in terms of implementation in Tangyin, as in Lankao and Tongxu, led to much initiative being shown, even at the township level. Township cadres, for example, often visited other communities to exchange information about their experiences and, in one township, this even resulted in a change from a developer's model to a cheaper self-building model in order to prevent discontent among the population (Anonymous 10 2013). However, the high level of strategic agency and steering capacity among leading county cadres resulted in a much more coordi-

nated approach to urbanisation and development than that employed in Kaifeng. *In situ* urbanisation was integrated into a detailed development plan based on the zoning of the entire county territory, for which the county government had especially commissioned a Qingdao planning and design institute, and most rural communities were already, or were to become, part of county city-planning.

Towards a New Form of Chinese *in situ* Urbanisation?

Under the strong steering by the county in the case of Tangyin (Henan Province), not all *in situ* urbanisation projects were implemented smoothly, because several villages were forced to urbanise before adequate local economic conditions could be established to raise the county city's construction quota. In one community, which was built after all the land of the former villages had been expropriated, for example, the local migrant worker ratio went up to 60 per cent, because local industrial development could not absorb all the landless peasants or provide a sufficient income for them (Anonymous 11 2013). It would still be misleading, however, to equate this county-centred approach to *in situ* urbanisation with the rural population concentration in the context of urban expansionism. Compared with the case of Bozhou Municipality (Anhui Province) described above, for example, major differences appear:

- The county government of Tangyin adopted a more integrated approach, taking into consideration both local urban and rural conditions to a much greater extent.
- The leading cadres not only had an urban identity, but also established closer cooperative relationships with the rural townships. In many land-conversion cases, the township cadres dealt with the companies and made the contracts with the villages, which enabled them to decide upon specific conditions themselves. Township initiatives for their own rural community-building could also be integrated into the county plan, as was, for example, the case in one township, which decided to build a new community outside the plan in order to satisfy the urgent housing demand. It was supposed to be located next to the town's industrial park, in order to provide for the necessary new employment opportunities (Anonymous 9 2013).

- Different phases for rural community-building were defined, starting with infrastructure development – since 2009, the county had invested more than 2.3 billion CNY (approximately 285.6 million EUR) in infrastructure, by adopting a build-and-transfer (BT) mode (Anonymous 9 2013) – and only then progressing to community-building; land conversion also followed a step-by-step approach. In the most underdeveloped areas, for example, the pressure to undertake resettlement was suspended and the party secretary made clear at several government meetings that no coercive measures were to be adopted (Anonymous 12 2013).

Table 1. Overview of Cases Displaying the Relationship between Relative Political Autonomy and Urbanisation Modes

Case	Degree of relative political autonomy	Dominant resource-exchange mechanism	Dominant mode of urbanisation	Expected degree of sustainability
Bozhou, Anhui	Weak	Financial resources for construction-land quota	Urban expansion and rural population concentration	Low
Anyang, Henan	Strong	Fulfilment of political goals for political awards (or exemption from punishment)	Rural <i>in situ</i> urbanisation	High
Kaifeng, Henan	Strong	Fulfilment of political goals for political awards (or exemption from punishment)	Rural <i>in situ</i> urbanisation	Low

As a result, the different cases within Henan Province described above suggest that the strong relative political autonomy of county and township cadres does indeed lead to a new form of Chinese *in situ* urbanisation, which is characterised by a different local political dynamic compared to cases of rural population concentration in the context of urban expansionism: It requires the steering and guidance of a local government organisation and, consequently, involves a different quality of local interactions both among the local government organisations and between local government organisations and

other economic and social actors. This rather decentralised implementation approach seems to allow for local initiatives from the county level down to the village level and a relatively high degree of adjustment to local conditions, but usually also seems to be connected with less funding from the upper levels than is given to population concentration in the context of urban expansion. In addition, the risk of ad hoc measures and disorderly economic management increases, particularly when local government organisations lack entrepreneurial and steering capacities (see Table 1).

Conclusion

In March 2014, the central government issued a comprehensive “National New-Type Urbanisation Programme” (国家新型城镇化规划, *Guojia xinxing chengzhenhua guihua*), which aims to give China’s urbanisation process a more “human” face (CCP Central Committee and State Council 2014). The main goals include the integration of migrant workers and the abolition of the dual system of public-service provision; there is no longer any direct reference to rural community-building. In fact, the practice of demolishing villages and rebuilding them as urban-style neighbourhoods is criticised in the document for disrupting rural customs and culture (CCP Central Committee and State Council 2014: ch.2). Nevertheless, the programme also provides for continuing the redevelopment of villages and the construction of new housing areas (CCP Central Committee and State Council 2014: ch.22), and it therefore seems beyond doubt that China’s “new urbanisation” will also continue to radically transform the Chinese countryside. It would still be misleading to see the urbanisation that is currently taking place in the Chinese countryside merely as a draconian mega-project involuntarily sketched out by the central government to change the living conditions of millions of peasants. Such a view belies the variations in local state dynamics and intergovernmental relations in China today. There are great differences in the extent to which leading local cadres can steer the urbanisation process and adapt the relevant policies to local conditions and population demands. It therefore seems promising to differentiate between rural urbanisation in different territorial settings characterised by different intergovernmental relationships and different degrees of relative political autonomy of leading county and township cadres. More specif-

ically, urbanisation in rural areas may be dominated by prefectural city governments, which trigger population concentration in villages and market towns mainly for the sake of urban expansion. It is characterised by the lower levels' strong dependency upon and constrained room to manoeuvre vis-à-vis the upper levels; in addition, the exchange in resources between the prefectures and the lower levels focuses on the exchange of land for upper-level financial resources. The strong relative political autonomy of county and township cadres, on the other hand, seems to engender a new version of the rural *in situ* urbanisation of the 1980s and 1990s. Although clearly motivated by political pressure from above to drive forward the implementation of central and provincial urbanisation goals, it is characterised by local political dynamics that rely on the steering of a local government organisation and generally seems to allow for more local initiatives that connect population concentration with local economic-development projects and the possibility of tailoring urbanisation to local conditions. If the county's steering and entrepreneurial capacities are relatively weak, however, the risk that political pressures from above will override opportunities for local development grows, as does the risk of economic mismanagement.

Urban expansionism lost some political and intellectual support in China when violent cases of land expropriation accumulated and rural development became a political focus of attention, but the more decentralised versions of rural *in situ* urbanisation have begun to trigger even more contention in some places, and this has confirmed the fears of disorderly rural governance that are prevalent among the neoliberal reformers and experts currently dominating China's urbanisation policymaking. This might explain why the central government's new urbanisation programme does not specifically include the construction of new rural communities. In rural urbanisation today, there seems to be only a very fine line between stimulating rural development and provoking political, economic and social inefficiencies. In sum, the future of Chinese village society is uncertain, and the substantial reconfiguration of the local cadres' relative power seems to be gathering pace. The restructuring of the rural landscape in rural communities and central villages will reduce the number of village cadres, strengthen administrative control over the villages and change the practice and content of village politics. The future role of the townships and of township cadres in between rural communities and

counties is highly uncertain. The counties may benefit from a compressed administrative landscape, but in cases of suburbanisation, the powers of both counties and townships will diminish. In any case, the result of the power reconfiguration of the next decade will decide the shape of China's future *in situ* urbanisation.

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