

Research on the Motivation Behind Rural Protest Against Land Confiscation From the Perspective of Vertical Relative Deprivation Theory

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ABSTRACT

In the studies of peasant protest in contemporary rural China, the game of economic interests has been the focus of research. However, as criminological research has intensified, many studies have shown that individual psychological perceptions and emotional resentment mediate economic influences on violent behavior. In order to improve the motivational research on rural protest, the essay uses the theory of longitudinal relative deprivation as a basis to further explain the relationship between peasants' subjective feelings, emotional responses, and social patterns through the analysis of public data and peasant surveys. This paper mainly uses qualitative methods to investigate the attitudes and views of peasants' motivations for land acquisition. The study found that rural protest is a special behavior showing relative psychological and emotional imbalance before and after land acquisition. This imbalance is caused by the conflict and neglect between individual and social relations and identity in the process of land acquisition. When dealing with the factors affecting the behavior of individuals or groups, in addition to objective factors such as economy and environment, the psychological expectations of individuals and groups and their social and cultural background should also be comprehensively considered. This paper will provide a new perspective for the study of farmers' protest, and provide enlightenment and reference for land confiscation.

Keywords: Vertical relative deprivation, rural protest, land confiscation, social identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between people and land has been an important topic of study in modern rural China. In the process of urbanization, land confiscation has largely affected the economic resources distribution and lifestyles of Chinese peasants. Although they received financial compensation in accordance with regulations and market development, a large proportion of peasants who lost their land showed dissatisfaction and even developed into protest behavior [1]. Based on this, the essay focuses on the behavioral logic and motives behind Chinese peasants' resistance to land confiscation which means the changes in their historical and social roles before and after land confiscation and the resulting sense of relative deprivation, instead of the main focus of previous scholars on economic interests and public policy factors.

The essay argues that peasants' motivations for protest stem largely from the sense of vertical relative

deprivation brought about by land confiscation, which could be also considered as a challenge to their lifestyles, social roles, and self-identities as a result of social change. In the process of land confiscation, the traditional way of life is significantly changed and peasants are separated from the original regional social ecology, while the new environment does not pay attention to their social roles and spiritual needs, leading them to feel a relative, social, unbalanced and vertically different sense of deprivation, i.e., a sense of relative deprivation. At the same time, this sense of deprivation is difficult to detect and compensate for, which is an important reason for peasants to resist and use protest, a form of deviant behavior, to resist [2]. The essay will analyze the factors that make peasants feel a sense of vertical deprivation and the characteristics of Chinese rural society behind them, taking individual peasants in the process of land-demolition as an entry point.

2. THEORY AND METHOD

The essay mainly uses the longitudinal relative deprivation in the theory of relative deprivation to analyze. Deprivation theory was originally proposed by the American scholar S.A.Stouffer, and Merton in the book *Social Theory and Social Structure* analyzed Stouffer's empirical research in detail, proposed three types of reference frame such as people with relations, people of the same status, people of different status or categories, and formed the reference group theory [3]. Merton's reference groups are horizontal, but as time passes and social situations become more complex, scholars find that relative deprivation theory is also applicable to vertical comparisons. Chinese scholar Li Jun borrows the concepts of "reference group" and "relative deprivation" from Merton's theory, and isolates the vertical relative deprivation as a valuable perspective for special study [4].

This paper uses a qualitative method, mainly using peasants before land expropriation took place as the reference group, to understand the attitudes and perceptions of the researched from a primary position (i.e., the perspective of the people involved) [5]. In order to make the study more impartial, the essay is conducted on groups of peasants in the 21st century, because in this period, China's land-demolition compensation policies have begun to improve and scholars could conduct the study in a more adequate environment. To ensure the credibility of the study, this essay would use a combination of reports, survey results and statistics from government and state official agencies, as well as some case studies and interviews as the main data for the study.

3. RESULTS

In contrast to migrant workers who enter the cities actively, landless peasants are in a passive position in the process of urbanization. Whether they are working in non-agricultural jobs in the countryside or are mostly farmers, they lack the right to choose and have a voice in land confiscation [6]. But this passivity does not mean that the peasants are devoid of self and rationality. The continuity of Chinese agricultural identity and their own social nature give them a sense of identity as a group and as individuals. However, this spiritual and social perspective is not included in the compensation and guarantee mechanism, which results in the fact that although land confiscation offers peasants responsive compensation and improvement of their living environment, they still consider themselves deprived in the process. At the same time, because this sense of deprivation is difficult to identify and quantify, the number of protests against land confiscation has increased after the policy has been improved. In the process of sorting out the data and surveys, the

longitudinal contrast of peasants' feedback in social connection and self-identity are most obvious [7], so the essay will analyze the relative sense of deprivation of landless farmers in land acquisition and eviction from these three aspects by combining the data and reports from the actual research.

3.1. Social connection

3.1.1. The Demise of Relationship

Because the village is a slow-moving, extended family-based social space, the connections between individual farmers in the village are quite tight. For example, many villages in China are named after a particular family name, and for marriages or funerals in the village, people from the entire village are usually invited to help, and these individuals usually have intricate kinship ties [8]. After land acquisition, this interpersonal interaction was directly cut, and the choice of different villagers led to a dramatic change in their place and way of life, and the interpersonal interaction between them gradually became scarce. Table 1 shows the changes in the number of visits to rural neighborhood relations before and after demolition and resettlement [9]. This sense of deprivation is classified as social and spiritual deprivation, which is difficult to be detected and measured, and this has further pushed the farmers to project this sense of deprivation as dysfunctional behavior, which is shown in many acts of resistance.

Table 1. Comparison of the number of neighborhood visits before and after land demolition and resettlement

| Option | Visits before demolition | | Visits after demolition | |
|------------|--------------------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|
| | number | Percentage | number | percentage |
| Many | 113 | 40.8 | 20 | 7.2 |
| More | 122 | 44 | 51 | 18.5 |
| General | 29 | 10.5 | 67 | 24.3 |
| Less | 10 | 3.6 | 100 | 36.2 |
| No contact | 3 | 1.1 | 38 | 13.8 |
| Total | 277 | 100.0 | 276 | 100.0 |

3.1.2. Social Trust

In addition to the social connections within the peasantry being stripped away with land acquisition, changes in the situation of peasant groups have led to challenges in their connections with society. According to the China Rural Urbanization Re-Study, strangers' distrust of landless farmers was 69.5% (including distrust and total distrust), but their relatives, friends,

fellow clansmen and neighbors had the highest distrust of only 14.2% [10]. This stark contrast indicates that farmers are less accepted by unfamiliar societies after losing their land, and even if peasants have a good reputation in their former place of residence, they are not recognized by the new social area. This also creates anger that peasants are excluded from society for no reason, and this anger also comes from the sharp contrast with their previous lives. This contrast and the huge gap between them lead the farmers who cannot integrate into the urban society to choose more violent ways to resist and defend their rights.

3.2. Self-identity

After land confiscation, the peasants' lifestyles were transformed in two ways: one is to continue living in the villages and working in factories built from agricultural land or in commercial organizations after land transfer contracts; the other is to enter urban housing built in cities to compensate for the loss of housing peasants. In this way, in addition to the weakening of the emotional connections and interpersonal interactions among the original village folk, their original production methods have also undergone great changes, and such changes have led to the marginalization of their labor in society, thus their sense of self-identity in social life has been deprived compared to that before land confiscation.

3.2.1. Marginalization of economic and political discourse

For ordinary peasants, the way in which land is expropriated and then operated by downstream capital in some areas makes them lose their autonomy over land cultivation. In the case of Village D in County G, although this unified management makes the collective income of the village higher, most of its proceeds are collected by the capital, and it is difficult for peasants to achieve affluence close to home. At the same time, most of the production activities directed by professionals adopt fully mechanized or semi-mechanized production methods, and some enterprises will hire specialized agricultural teams to carry out production activities. The peasants' original production methods cannot play a role in the new production activities, and their economic voice as a member of the village is replaced by downstream capital in terms of both income and production methods, also the original way of economic interest activities occurs with land confiscation. The absence of this part of the rights and interests creates a sense of relative deprivation for the peasants, while the expectations remain the same.

On the other hand, the marginalization of political discourse has also created a stronger sense of deprivation among peasants. Since 1998, China has started village self-governance [11], in which village

party branches and village committees are elected to jointly govern the village. Although the structure of power has not changed, the public nature of village organizations has changed after land expropriation, as the source of interests of village cadres has changed and their behavioral tendencies have been squeezed, and the space for political expression in villages has begun to be tilted toward the "elite" farmers, while ordinary farmers have been sidelined. At the same time, the survey also found that many of the "nail households" engaged in violent protests and other irregular expressions of opinion because they had difficulty expressing their opinions and their sense of political marginality increased significantly [12].

3.2.2. The Dilemma of Career Development and Identity Re-establishment

A study of dislocated farmers showed that most farmers in rural areas were farm workers before land confiscation, while nearly 50% became unemployed after the demolition, with the rest working in low-income, low-security jobs such as security guards, cleaning workers, and laborers [12]. In addition to the low acceptance of landless peasants in the city, the data from this study show that it is difficult for peasants to find a stable and identity-generating job after losing their previous occupation. Similar to the situation of peasants in the countryside, they are also pushed to the urban periphery. In rural life, peasants' social identity is stable, and their self-identity comes from the influence of family, rural society and tradition in many ways, with good stability and a strong sense of identity. But land confiscation moves some peasants' identity and residence from the countryside to the city in a short period of time, without guaranteeing them a stable job. This results in the peasants' sense of identity receiving a shock without reasonable guidance and compensation. It could be considered that their original identity is deprived but no new identity fills the gap in society, which means that specific traditions and norms of agriculture are destroyed while new norms are missing, resulting in a new division of social labor without precise normative guidance and consequently abnormal behavior. In addition to violent resistance, the increase in crime among peasants after land loss supports this view to some extent.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Synthesis analysis

It is clear from the discussion above that the peasants' sense of deprivation after land demolition has been formed in the context of individual divestment in the changes of social pattern, and that the government and official institutions, while providing policy and economic protection for land confiscation, have

neglected the adaptation of farmers' groups to the new social model. In the process of China's rural economic and social development, although Chinese agriculture has been transformed into a mechanized and commercialized "diversified family livelihood" model compared to the traditional smallholder economy, most of peasants still maintain a small-scale farming system of "one mu and three cents per capita and no more than ten mu per household" due to the previous land system [13]. However, land expropriation has disrupted the old way of life. With the relocation of residence, job changes or loss of jobs, peasants' interpersonal relationships, social trust and self-identity have been damaged to varying degrees, and individual peasants are unable to adapt quickly and autonomously compared to living in familiar groups under the traditional model.

It is noteworthy that this kind of relative deprivation is more inclined to a spiritual feeling of lack, but this lack is often not perceived and compensated in a short period of time. The standard of compensation received by peasants is generally determined by the Law of the People's Republic of China on Land Administration in conjunction with provincial policies, according to the original use of the expropriated land, which generally includes land compensation, resettlement subsidy and compensation for ground attachments, but no corresponding attention is paid to the way of life of farmers after they enter urban life [14]. As a result, many peasants have been given economic security, but the transformation of their social relationships has not received the attention and response of mainstream society, and there is a lack of policies and security measures. It means that there is a lack of effective communication and petition channels, meaning that farmers are unable to channel their needs through the prescribed channels. This obstruction prevents farmers from addressing their sense of relative deprivation in a timely manner, and gives rise to violent resistance, which is a highly "dysfunctional" means of feedback with a sectoral emotional outburst.

4.2. Other factors

In addition to the social factors, this sense of relative deprivation also comes from the traditional Chinese rules and family concepts that regulate Chinese peasants. With the advent of the People's Commune period, the mode of life in the Chinese countryside gradually changed, but it is still dominated by a semi-closed, fixed community, with most of the contacts being with people of the same clan, which can also be seen from the fact that most of the names in the Chinese countryside are based on family names. Based on this tradition and the need for group collaboration in production, Chinese farmers are much more dependent on and trustful of their clans and groups than those living in urban areas. The act of land expropriation,

however, has destroyed the human ecological balance of the countryside in a very short period of time and has made a huge impact on the traditional way of life in the countryside, and this destruction is a spiritual deprivation that cannot be avoided and adapted to in a short period of time for the peasant groups who are deeply affected by this cultural environment. Therefore, rural protests also include psychological and emotional imbalance [15].

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the research, rural protest is a particular behavior expressing the relative psychological and emotional imbalance before and after land confiscation, and this imbalance is caused by the violation and neglect between individual and social ties and identities in the process. By considering subjective and objective factors such as individual peasants' social identities, interpersonal relationships, and career development before and after land expropriation, this thesis incorporates social factors with individual characteristics into the consideration of group behavior, thus showing that in addition to objective circumstances (e.g., economic and political factors), individuals' comparative cognitive and emotional responses can also determine the occurrence of behavior. Therefore, the research hopes that when dealing with the factors influencing the behavior of individuals or groups, the psychological expectations of individuals and groups, and the social and cultural context to which they belong, in addition to objective factors, should be included in the scope of the study.

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