

A Rescaling Perspective on Rural Transformation in China: An Analytical Framework of Power-Capital-Society

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of rapid urbanization, rural China is undergoing profound functional transformation and urgently requires new theoretical perspectives beyond traditional narratives. This paper introduces rescaling theory, which originated in the context of Western globalization, and systematically examines its value and limitations for understanding rural transformation in China. Although rescaling theory has inherent advantages in explaining the dynamic reorganization of cross-scale power, capital, and social relations, its market-economy origins and macro-scale descriptive tendency create challenges when it is applied to China's rural functional transformation. It faces theoretical adaptability challenges caused by institutional contexts and operational challenges caused by scale shifts. The paper therefore explores the main challenges and issues involved in applying this theory to China's rural functional transformation, and integrates it into an analytical framework of rural territorial rescaling based on the three dimensions of power, capital, and society. The framework aims to reveal how external forces and endogenous structures jointly shape rural spaces through scale struggles and embeddedness during rural transformation.

Keywords: rescaling; rural transformation; power-capital-society

Driven by urbanization and globalization, rural China is experiencing unprecedented spatial and social transformation [1]. Its complexity cannot be captured by linear narratives such as urban advance and rural retreat or the dissolution of the countryside [2]. Rural territories have shifted from relatively closed and stable structures to open fields that are continuously opened and reconstructed by multiple forces [3]. Power, capital, information, and population flow across scales with unprecedented intensity and speed [4], generating heterogeneous rural functions and profound governance changes [5]. Rescaling theory, with its sensitivity to the political-economic attributes of space [6], transcends static administrative boundaries and treats space as a dynamic field constructed by socioeconomic spatial relations [7], thus providing an explanatory tool for understanding rural transformation.

This paper seeks to promote dialogue between rescaling theory and Chinese rural studies. It discusses the structural differences between Chinese and Western contexts and theoretical origins, as well as the theoretical adaptability and research-operational challenges caused by scale shifts. It first reviews the connotation, value, and limitations of rescaling theory, clarifies its connection with the multiple meanings of rural space, and demonstrates its applicability to rural studies. It then analyzes the challenges arising from institutional context and scale transformation and proposes research issues. Finally, it integrates these issues into a three-dimensional analytical framework of power, capital, and society for rural territorial rescaling in China.

1 Review of rescaling studies

1.1 Connotation of rescaling

In human geography and political economy, scale is not simply a neutral level of spatial hierarchy. It is a relational product formed through social practice, political struggle, and institutional arrangement [8]. Rescaling refers to the reorganization of governance authority, capital circulation, social networks, and spatial relations across different levels. It emphasizes that scale is produced and reconstructed rather than given, and that social actors can alter the allocation of resources and power by constructing, shifting, or nesting scales [9-10].

1.2 The intellectual value and limitations of rescaling

The value of rescaling lies in its ability to connect macro structures with local practices. It reveals how globalization, state spatial strategies, and regional governance reshape local spaces [10-13]. It is therefore useful for understanding the cross-scale flow of elements and the dynamic reorganization of relationships. Yet the theory originated largely from Western market-economy contexts and tends to emphasize metropolitan regions, state spatial restructuring, and capital accumulation. When applied to rural China, it risks underestimating the role of state institutions, collective land systems, administrative hierarchy, and endogenous rural social relations.

2 Applicability of rescaling in rural studies

2.1 New interpretations of globalization: planetary urbanization and global countryside

The globalization perspective has been extended from cities to rural areas. Theories of planetary urbanization argue that urbanization has become a generalized process that reorganizes both urban and rural territories [12]. Woods's global countryside framework further emphasizes that rural places are no longer isolated or static, but are reshaped by global capital, tourism, migration, ecological governance, and cultural representation [14]. These perspectives help reveal how rural spaces are connected with translocal and transnational flows and how rurality is reconstituted through hybridity [15].

2.2 Rural space and scalar connotation

Rural space has multiple scalar meanings. It is a settlement and production space, a governance unit, a cultural-symbolic space, and a relational network. In rural transformation, the village is linked upward to counties, regions, national policies, and global markets, and downward to households, land plots, production organizations, and social networks. This nested and relational character makes rural space suitable for rescaling analysis [16-20].

2.3 Rural functional transformation and rescaling

Rural functional transformation involves changes in production, living, ecological, cultural, and governance functions. It is accompanied by the reallocation of land, labor, capital, and public resources across scales [21-24]. Market capital can reconstruct rural economic space through tourism, real estate, and industrial projects [25-27]. State-led programs can reorganize governance space through administrative projects, planning systems, and rural revitalization policies [30,34]. Social organizations and local communities can reshape social space through networks, participation, and endogenous norms [31-33].

2.4 Applicability of rescaling in rural research

Rescaling is applicable to rural research because rural transformation is fundamentally a process in which external forces and local structures are recombined. It can explain how power is redistributed through policy and planning, how capital reorganizes rural resources and value chains, and how social networks reconstruct local order. However, to fit the Chinese context, rescaling analysis must be adjusted to account for the active role of the party-state, administrative hierarchy, collective ownership, and rural social embeddedness.

3 Challenges of applying rescaling in the Chinese rural context

3.1 Real expression of new globalization interpretations in China

In China, globalization and urbanization are mediated by state spatial strategies, industrial policies, land institutions, and county-level governance. Rural areas are incorporated into global and regional networks through agricultural modernization, cultural tourism, industrial transfer, logistics, ecological governance, and digital platforms. This incorporation is not a simple market process; it is shaped by state programs, local government action, and collective land institutions [30,34-37].

3.2 Structural differences between Chinese and Western contexts

The Western context that gave rise to rescaling theory is often marked by market-oriented governance, metropolitan regionalism, and decentralization. China's rural context differs structurally. The county-township-village hierarchy has strong administrative features, collective land ownership creates a distinctive rights structure, and local governments play an active role in mobilizing land, capital, and projects. Rural transformation is therefore not merely a shift among abstract scales, but a process shaped by administrative hierarchy, institutional authority, and rural collectives.

3.3 Operational challenges of rescaling in Chinese rural transformation studies

When rescaling theory is introduced into Chinese rural studies, a key challenge is operationalization. Rural transformation occurs simultaneously at multiple levels, including households, villages, townships, counties, regions, and national policy systems. The relevant scale may vary by issue: land governance, industrial development, ecological protection, public services, and social organization each produce different scalar relations. Researchers therefore need to move beyond macro description and develop concepts and methods that can identify concrete scalar actors, mechanisms, and outcomes.

3.4 Research issues for rural rescaling in China

Key issues include how state power reshapes rural institutional space, how capital flow reconstructs rural economic space, how relationship networks maintain or transform rural social space, and how these dimensions interact. It is also necessary to examine how planning, land institutions, collective organizations, social capital, and local norms are embedded in one another. These issues form the basis for a three-dimensional analytical framework.

4 An analytical framework for rural territorial rescaling in China

The analytical framework proposed here takes power, capital, and society as three dimensions. They correspond respectively to rural institutional space, rural economic space, and rural social space. Rural transformation is shaped by the interaction of these dimensions rather than by any single force.

4.1 Power struggles and rural institutional space

Power is expressed through state programs, planning authority, administrative hierarchy, land institutions, and public-resource allocation. In China, the party-state and local governments play active roles in rural revitalization, spatial governance, and resource mobilization [34,36,46]. Power rescaling occurs when authority and responsibility are shifted among national, provincial, county, township, village, and project levels. It can create new institutional spaces for rural development but may also produce conflicts between top-down governance and local autonomy.

4.2 Capital flows and rural economic space

Capital enters rural areas through tourism, agriculture, industry, real estate, infrastructure, and digital platforms. It reconstructs land use, value chains, employment structures, and spatial forms [25,35,48]. Capital rescaling links village resources with regional markets and global consumption networks. Yet it may also cause uneven development, land-value capture, and displacement of local interests if not embedded in appropriate governance and social mechanisms.

4.3 Relationship networks and rural social space

Rural social space is composed of kinship, neighborhood relations, collective organizations, social norms, and local identities. These relationship networks are not residual traditional elements; they constitute important mechanisms for resource coordination, conflict mediation, and collective action [38-43]. In rescaling processes,

external projects and institutions must be embedded in local social relations. Otherwise, rural transformation may weaken social cohesion and reduce the legitimacy of governance.

4.4 Interaction among the three dimensions

Power, capital, and society interact through mutual embedding. Power provides institutional channels and regulatory frameworks for capital entry, while capital supplies resources and incentives for spatial transformation. Social networks condition the acceptance, adaptation, and local effects of both power and capital. Conversely, local society can reshape power strategies and capital projects through negotiation, resistance, cooperation, and everyday practice. Rural rescaling in China should therefore be understood as a dynamic process of scale struggle and embedded governance.

5 Conclusion

Rescaling theory provides a valuable perspective for interpreting China's rural transformation, but it must be adapted to China's institutional and rural contexts. The power-capital-society framework proposed in this paper connects state power, market capital, and local social relations, and helps explain how external forces and endogenous structures jointly reshape rural space. Future research should further develop operational methods for identifying scalar actors, mechanisms, and outcomes, and should examine how planning can mediate among power, capital, and society to support more equitable and sustainable rural transformation.

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