Stratified Articulation of Collective Land Rights for Rural Revitalization: Exploring Three Practice Models in Zhejiang Province

Xu Heng, Pan Xiangxiang, Gong Hua, Tong De

Abstract

Against the strategic background of rural revitalization, this paper constructs a theoretical framework for the stratified articulation of collective land rights and clarifies, from the perspective of benefit realization, the pathway through which land-based "rights" are converted into tangible "benefits". It proposes an implementation framework consisting of a basic security layer, a stable returns layer and a risk investment layer. Drawing on local innovations in Zhejiang Province, the paper examines three representative practice models: the collective-led model of Yucun, the government-led and market-participatory model of Hengshanwu Village, and the market-driven model of Lujia Village and Hongmiao Village. These models show how the stratified articulation of collective land rights can mobilize villagers, optimize land allocation and use, and support sustainable rural development. The findings provide analytical and practical reference for improving collective land governance and advancing rural revitalization.

Keywords

Rural revitalization; collective land use; stratified articulation of rights and interests; Zhejiang model

Introduction

Rural revitalization is an integral part of Chinese modernization. The 2018 No. 1 Central Document set out the overall requirements of thriving industries, livable ecology, civilized rural customs, effective governance and prosperous life [1]. The 2024 Five-Year Action Plan for People-Centered New Urbanization further emphasized that, when rural residents settle in cities, their land contract rights, homestead use rights and collective income distribution rights should be protected in accordance with the law.

Land is the key spatial carrier that links people, land, industry and capital, and coordinates production, living and ecological spaces. It is therefore a fundamental support for rural revitalization [2]. Clear definition and allocation of rural land rights directly affect the optimization of rural space and the quality and efficiency with which mountains, rivers, forests, farmland, lakes and grasslands are used [3]. In recent reforms, attention has increasingly shifted from securing basic subsistence to enabling wealth growth from land: how farmers can earn income, earn more income and earn it continuously [4]. Property rights are a crucial institutional arrangement for securing such returns [5]. The central issue is thus how to activate the potential value of land, convert rights into returns, stabilize farmers' income and support agricultural prosperity [6].

Existing reforms have improved the system of separating ownership, contract rights and management rights, but they still do not fully respond to farmers' practical concerns: what levels and stability of income can land actually generate, and how can rights attached to land translate into better lives? To address this question, this paper draws on property-rights theory and constructs a framework of "basic security - stable returns - risk investment". Starting from the composition and stratification of benefit bundles, it traces back to corresponding property-right arrangements and realization pathways. The aim

is to build a benefit-oriented analytical framework that responds to unclear realization paths, uneven benefit distribution and insufficient articulation between rights and returns in rural collective land use.

1 Theoretical Logic of Stratified Articulation of Collective Land Rights

Scholars have extensively discussed the relationship between rural revitalization and land institutions, including land expropriation, homestead reform, the marketization of suburban collective construction land, rural planning and rural governance [7-13]. The stratified articulation of collective land rights proposed in this paper is grounded in property-rights theory. Rural land rights include ownership, use rights, management rights and related powers [14-16]. Property-rights theory emphasizes the definition, protection and transaction of rights. In this sense, land property rights refer to the complete set of property-related rights attached to land [17]. Bundle theory further treats land rights as a bundle rather than a single, indivisible entitlement [18].

Previous studies have examined changes in land property-rights systems [19], decentralization of land powers [20], and institutional innovation in rural land reform [21-22]. Traditional analysis of the rights bundle has often centered on the "separation of three rights", namely collective ownership, household contract rights and land management rights. It has also discussed private-plot ownership, homestead ownership, land rental rights, land-use transfer, contract rights, land-use rights, construction rights and development rights [23]. These studies are valuable, yet they do not sufficiently reveal how property-right arrangements affect the distribution of benefits. In practice, rural collective land reform still faces blurred right boundaries, unclear realization mechanisms and unequal benefit distribution [24].

For this reason, benefit-oriented layering of rights is essential. Benefit stratification concerns not only distribution among different groups and sectors, but also the modes of land development and use [25]. Theories of land benefits, informed by land-rent theory, income-distribution theory and production-function analysis, emphasize factor optimization, equity and lower transaction costs [26-27]. In rural collective land use, benefits are diverse. They include basic security benefits such as crop income from cultivated land and produce from forest or grassland; stable property income such as land-transfer rent and contracted management income; and risk-investment income generated through agricultural finance, land securitization and related instruments [28-30]. Together these constitute a "benefit bundle".

Accordingly, this paper links the benefit bundle with the rights bundle through a three-layer framework: basic security, stable returns and risk investment. This framework is not a simple one-to-one correspondence with ownership, contract rights and management rights. Rather, collective ownership is the institutional basis for basic security, household contract rights are the prerequisite for transfer and stable returns, and the liberalization of management rights is crucial for bringing in capital, technology and higher-risk investment. The focus on benefits helps shift the analysis from formal entitlement to farmers' actual income and livelihood improvement.

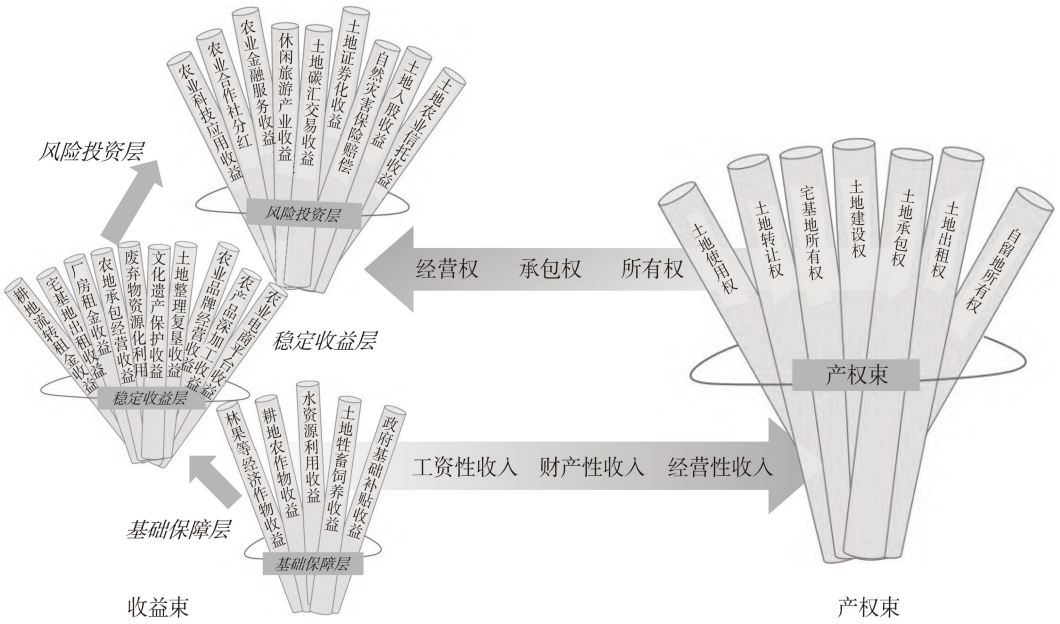

Fig. 1 Connotation and Relationship Between Property-Rights Bundles and Benefit Bundles

2 The "Basic Security - Stable Returns - Risk Investment" Framework

Based on the correspondence between rights bundles and benefit bundles, collective land rights can be divided into three layers, each associated with different factor combinations, right types and benefit-realization mechanisms. The basic security layer secures farmers' fundamental livelihoods; the stable returns layer improves the continuous income-generating capacity of land; and the risk investment layer activates higher-order value through capital, technology and market-based instruments.

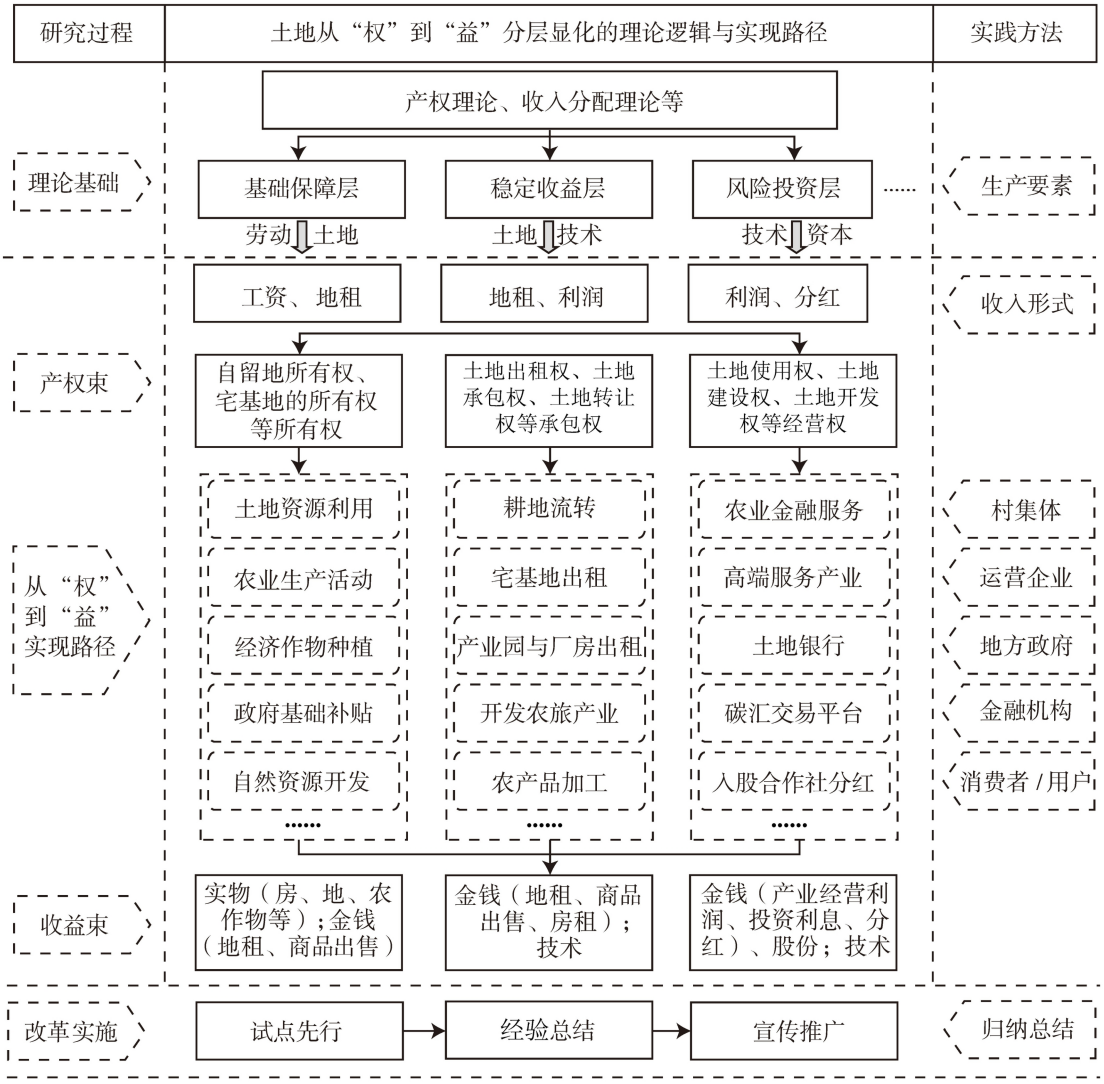

Fig. 2 "Basic Security - Stable Returns - Risk Investment" Framework

2.1 Basic Security Layer

The core factor of the basic security layer is land itself. This layer meets farmers' basic subsistence needs by securing collective land ownership, household contract-management rights and homestead use rights. Its main realization pathways include the use of land resources, agricultural production, cultivation of economic crops, government subsidies and the development of natural resources. The resulting benefits include physical benefits, such as housing, land and agricultural products, as well as monetary returns derived from land rent.

At this level, land functions first as a basic means of production and livelihood. Homestead rights guarantee rural residence, while agricultural land-use rights can be converted into income through crops, forest products and related outputs. Even when farmers no longer cultivate the land themselves, the land-use right remains an income-generating property right and provides a basic livelihood safeguard.

2.2 Stable Returns Layer

The stable returns layer combines land with labor and technology. By optimizing land allocation and refining land use, farmers can obtain continuous and relatively stable income, often in the form of rent, wages, operating income or dividends. This layer relies mainly on land-use rights, rental rights, transfer rights and contract rights. Its practical pathways include farmland transfer, crop sales and agricultural operations, homestead leasing, industrial-park or factory leasing, agro-tourism and agricultural-product processing.

Typical benefits include farmland-transfer rent, factory rent, homestead-lease income and contracted farm-operation income. Compared with the basic security layer, this layer places greater emphasis on improving land-use efficiency and generating additional, sustainable income. It provides farmers with a more stable basis for a decent life and gives rural land a stronger productive and property-income function.

2.3 Risk Investment Layer

The risk investment layer combines land with capital and technology. It enables diversified investment and financing, allowing farmers to shift from direct producers to indirect investors and to participate in agricultural financial services, land securitization and other high-risk, high-return projects. This layer activates land development rights and land management rights as financial and investment instruments. Possible mechanisms include land banks, carbon-sink trading platforms, land securitization, carbon trading and agricultural industry funds. Corresponding benefits include land-appreciation premiums, carbon-sink income and agricultural trust income. Because these benefits are closely linked to macro-market conditions, they are more uncertain but may generate higher returns. The risk investment layer therefore represents a deeper transformation from resources to assets and then to capital [34].

3 Typical Zhejiang Models of Stratified Articulation of Rural Collective Land Rights

Zhejiang Province is the birthplace of the "Two Mountains" concept and a demonstration zone for common prosperity. It has accumulated rich experience in collective land reform through eco-priority green development, ecological compensation, comprehensive land consolidation and digital village construction. This section examines representative Zhejiang cases to analyze factor allocation, rights articulation and institutional innovation.

In these cases, the basic security layer is mainly supported by national policy and village collective leadership, including land-rights confirmation, policy guarantees and resource use. The key differences lie in the stable returns and risk investment layers, especially in the roles played by village collectives, governments, enterprises and market actors.

3.1 Yucun: Collective-Led Ecological Product Model

Yucun is located in Tianhuangping Town, Anji County, Huzhou. It is a leading case of beautiful countryside construction, ecological civilization and democratic rule of law, and has been recognized as a national civilized village, a national beautiful and livable demonstration village, a national democratic and rule-of-law demonstration village, and one of the Best Tourism Villages named by the United Nations World Tourism Organization in 2021. Its experience is highly representative of grassroots governance and land reform under the guidance of the "Two Mountains" concept.

Yucun's success rests on a strong collective organization, accumulated social capital and the political-symbolic advantage of being the birthplace of the "Two Mountains" concept. The model is therefore

most suitable for well-known villages or towns with strong visibility and advantageous ecological resources. Its core feature is collective leadership. The village collective leads the three layers of rights articulation, while the government and market actors participate as supporters. At the basic security layer, the collective stabilizes land rights through unified planning and management, while allowing households to operate within clearly defined rights. At the stable returns and risk investment layers, the collective leads resource allocation, industrial guidance and benefit distribution.

At the basic security layer, land-rights confirmation stabilizes homestead ownership and use rights as well as agricultural land management rights. At the stable returns layer, land transfer, scale operation, leasing, tourism development, land requisition-related transfer and dividends provide villagers with stable income [35]. At the risk investment layer, Yucun brings in external capital and technology to develop rural tourism and new industries. Through a "digital + internet + ecology + culture" strategy, it has launched programs such as Global Partners, a digital nomad commune, science-and-innovation countryside initiatives and the Nature Workstation plan.

Idle land and collective construction land are converted into entrepreneurship spaces, business leasing sites and public-service venues, generating shared revenue. Idle buildings, homestays and forest land are transformed into productive service spaces, and operating income is used for infrastructure improvement and villager dividends. In this way, ecological resources and office space are converted into ecological products, forming a pathway from "lucid waters and lush mountains" to ecological product development and then to "gold and silver mountains".

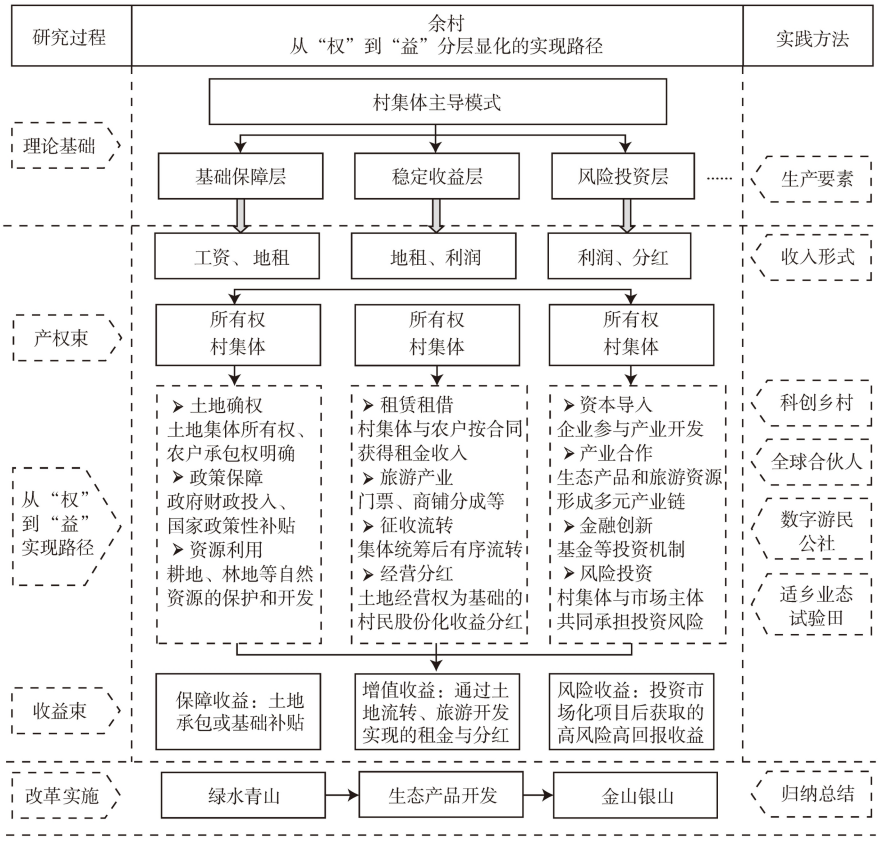

Fig. 3 Yucun Model

3.2 Hengshanwu Village: Government-Led, Market-Participatory Tourism Homestay Model

Hengshanwu Village is located in Lingfeng Subdistrict, Anji County, Huzhou. It has developed tourism products, governance mechanisms and rural industries, and was listed as a national key village for rural tourism in 2020, a beautiful leisure village of China in 2021, and a national beautiful and livable demonstration village. Its model can be summarized as government-led with market participation. It depends on local fiscal capacity and the government's willingness and ability to integrate resources. Although strong government intervention can be effective at the early stage, the model also faces challenges of sustainability and market sensitivity. It is therefore most suitable for suburban villages with locational advantages and governments capable of sustained input.

At the basic security layer, the village clarifies collective land rights, strengthens policy guarantees and improves resource use, thereby overcoming scattered and disorderly land management. At the stable returns layer, the government uses investment attraction, policy support and bank financing to introduce enterprises. Expropriation, transfer and integrated land management help reduce fragmentation and improve land-use intensity, while villagers obtain dividends, wages and rent. At the risk investment layer, the government and enterprises jointly assume risks, promote industrial transformation and create employment and income opportunities.

The characteristic development route is the integration of ancient-village protection, tourism vacations, rural festivals and the homestay industry. The "company + cooperative + farmers" mechanism is central. Scattered land is integrated through cooperatives; the cooperative returns collective land-operating income to villagers; and the company is responsible for project operation and employment creation. Farmers participate in use-right transactions and share appreciation returns through the cooperative. The village has developed more than ten homestay clusters and leisure projects, while cultural-tourism enterprises and external capital further enhance land value. Idle land has thus been transformed into a leisure-vacation industry and homestay village, generating both short- and long-term returns.

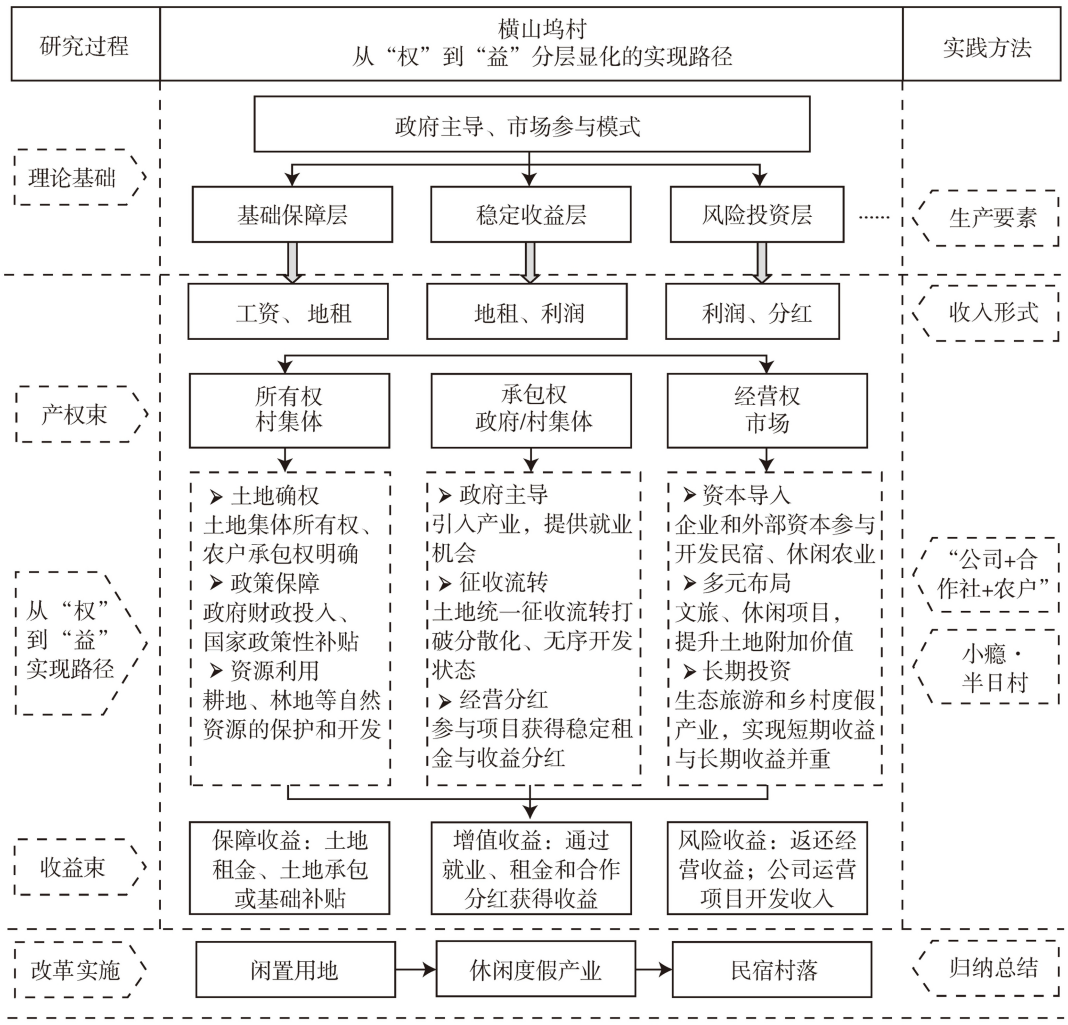

Fig. 4 Hengshanwu Village Model

3.3 Lujia Village and Hongmiao Village: Market-Led Internet-Famous Art and Creative Model

Lujia Village is located in Dipu Subdistrict, Anji County. Since the launch of its beautiful countryside project in 2011, it became one of the first national pastoral complex pilots in 2017 and a national key village for rural tourism in 2020. It represents the effectiveness of Zhejiang's high-level beautiful village construction and pastoral-complex development. Hongmiao Village, located in Meixi Town, Anji County, draws on its distinctive quarry and pit landscape resources. Villagers and the collective invest funds and resources as shares, while a company operates internet-famous leisure formats, generating notable results.

This market-led model depends heavily on distinctive and scarce resources, such as family-farm clusters and quarry landscapes, as well as market-sensitive creative capacity. At the basic security layer, the village collective still plays a leading role through land-rights confirmation, infrastructure provision and social security. At the stable returns and risk investment layers, however, market actors dominate. Characteristic industries, diversified investment and multiple participating actors allow villagers and collectives to share returns.

At the stable returns layer, market mechanisms concentrate agricultural land and organize it through shareholding cooperative companies or external enterprises. Unified planning and operation support characteristic industries, revenue sharing and land-equity participation. Lujia Village, for example, has developed a pastoral complex centered on ecological agriculture, rural tourism and leisure agriculture, supported by 18 family farms such as Lingzhi Farm and Peach Blossom Farm. Its mechanism combines government guidance, market leadership and enterprise operation.

At the risk investment layer, art intervention, cultural creativity, internet-famous consumption spaces and industrial heritage are used to enhance land value. Industrial cooperation and financial innovation help convert rural resources, assets and capital into an integrated platform for fragmented resource input, concentrated industrial output and comprehensive project returns. Hongmiao's Deep Blue Project illustrates this logic: ecological restoration of abandoned mines attracts ecological financing; the operating funds support projects such as Deep Blue Coffee; industrial returns feed back into environmental protection. Farmers, the government, banks and investors all gain from this cycle. In both villages, natural resources are transformed into marketized ecological tourism and creative consumption spaces, forming a pathway from scattered small plots to integrated rural assets and then to pastoral complexes.

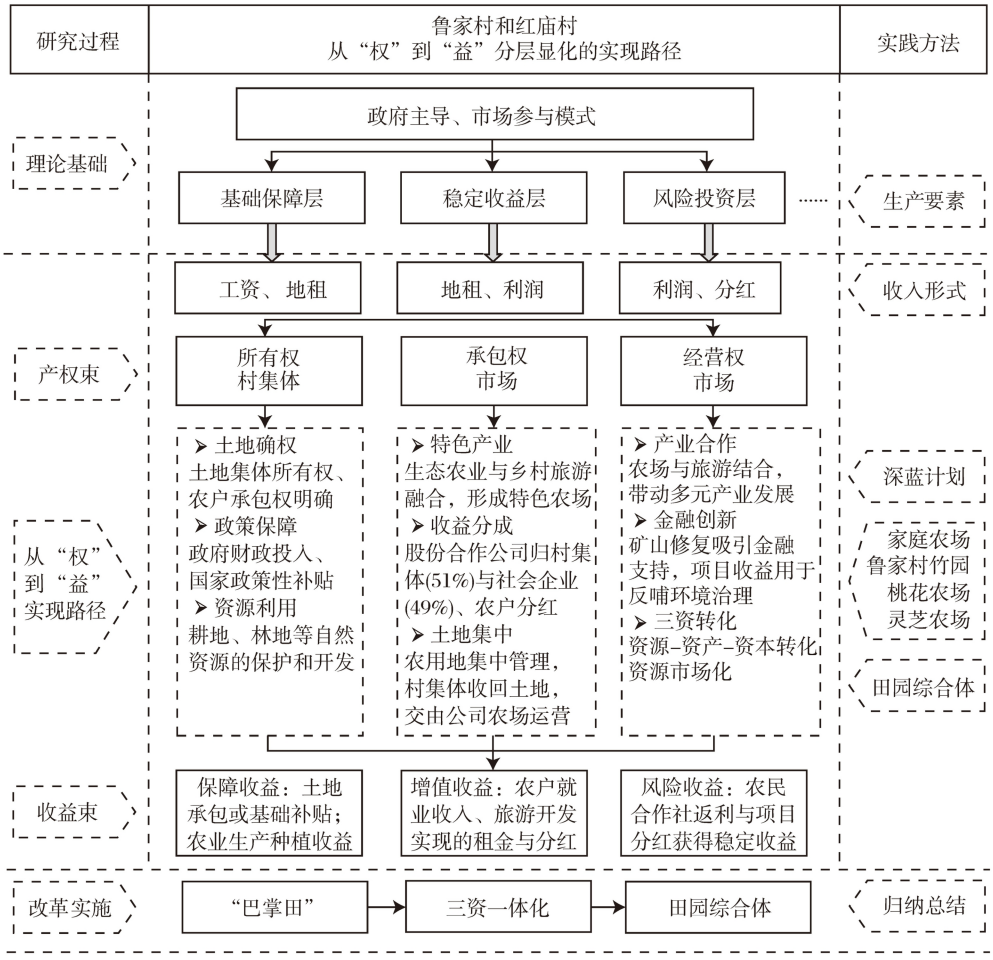

Fig. 5 Lujia Village and Hongmiao Village Model

4 Conclusions and Discussion

4.1 Conclusions

Focusing on rural revitalization, this paper analyzes multiple Zhejiang cases and examines the theoretical logic and practical pathways of the stratified articulation of collective land rights. It summarizes the innovation of the "basic security - stable returns - risk investment" framework and explores how scientific layering and articulation of land rights can optimize the allocation of collective land resources and support the construction of ecological, beautiful, prosperous, smart and harmonious villages. The main conclusions are as follows.

First, by combining property-rights theory with land-rent theory and income-distribution theory, the paper clarifies the coordination mechanism between the rights bundle and the benefit bundle. Taking the acquisition of land benefits as the criterion for stratification, it constructs a logical chain from rights to benefits. This helps address unclear definitions of collective land rights, ambiguous realization pathways and unequal benefit distribution, thereby supporting rural revitalization.

Second, the paper proposes a three-layer theoretical framework. The basic security layer is the necessary condition: with land as the key factor, it provides farmers with basic social security. The stable returns layer is the core support: with land, labor and technology as combined factors, it ensures that land generates continuous and stable returns. The risk investment layer represents deeper value: with land, capital and technology as combined factors, it promotes the integration of resources, assets and capital. The framework helps identify combined strategies for different modes of land development and use.

Third, the paper summarizes typical Zhejiang cases: the collective-led Yucun model, the government-led and market-participatory Hengshanwu model, and the market-led Lujia-Hongmiao model. It highlights their differentiated strategies in the stable returns and risk investment layers and distills practical experience in converting rights into benefits through stratified articulation.

4.2 Model Differentiation and Applicability

The three Zhejiang models differ markedly in actor coordination, resource allocation and risk sharing, and are suited to villages with different endowments.

The collective-led model is suitable for villages rich in ecological resources. It requires strong social capital and collective-action capacity, and its institutional performance depends on the authority and resource-integration capacity of the village collective. In Yucun, a closed-loop governance mechanism of rights confirmation, transfer and dividends converts ecological resources into value. Yet wider replication may encounter collective-action difficulties, especially where villager self-governance and organizational capacity are weak. Support should therefore combine internal cultivation with external empowerment. Internally, modern governance vehicles such as village collective asset-operation companies can clarify equity structures and income distribution. Externally, local governments should shift from direct intervention to service provision by offering legal, financial and project-matching support.

The government-led model is suitable for suburban transition villages with clear locational advantages. It can rapidly pool resources through policy tools, as seen in Hengshanwu's intervention paradigm of policy packages plus state-owned enterprise platforms. However, excessive government involvement may distort markets. A gradual exit mechanism should therefore be established, and institutional

flexibility should be preserved so that market actors can continue to participate after the initial government-led phase.

The market-led model is suitable for late-developing villages with distinctive and representative resources. Through property-right subdivision and asset-specific investment, it activates dormant assets. Hongmiao, for example, follows an evolutionary pathway of creative capital plus internet-famous economy. The key risk is capital capture. A composite governance architecture that includes equity design, guaranteed returns and participatory evaluation is needed to ensure that villagers continuously share appreciation returns.

It should also be noted that the three-layer framework must be adapted to local conditions. In remote or underdeveloped areas, where land has limited potential returns and low opportunity cost, practice may focus more on the implementation of basic security rights and livelihood maintenance. In eastern developed regions or near-city areas, where land appreciation potential and market conditions are stronger, the integrated development and coordinated articulation of all three layers is more feasible. The framework should therefore not be applied as a uniform template.

4.3 Discussion

By constructing the "basic security - stable returns - risk investment" model, this study explains the process of collective land resource allocation and rights articulation and summarizes pathways for improving current practice. On the basis of protecting farmers' basic rights, introducing market mechanisms and social capital can improve the allocation efficiency of land resources. More specifically, establishing rights-articulation mechanisms, improving land-market transaction platforms, developing rural tourism, building eco-agricultural data centers and creating low-carbon industrial operating entities can substantially enhance the capacity of land to generate stable returns. Attracting social capital to participate in collective land development, innovating land financial products and strengthening diversified financial support can further activate higher-order land value and provide sustainable economic support for rural revitalization [37].

This study nevertheless has limitations. Although it seeks to provide empirical reference for rural development and urban-rural planning nationwide, it does not fully account for regional differences in the potential income-generating capacity of land. In many central and western regions, due to development stage and locational constraints, land often lacks high-return uses and has relatively low opportunity cost. Even if rights are adjusted or land uses are reorganized through planning, it may still be difficult to obtain the excess returns observed in developed regions. This reality limits the national universality of the rights-articulation mechanisms and market-oriented pathways proposed here. The framework is more directly relevant to economically developed and policy-advantaged regions comparable to Zhejiang. Its effects across different regions and land types, especially in different rural contexts, require further verification.

Future research may proceed in two directions. First, it should pay closer attention to regional differences and examine land-benefit realization pathways under different development stages and resource endowments, especially institutional innovation in central and western regions where land opportunity costs are low. Second, it should focus on specific scenarios within the stratified articulation framework, including innovations in land finance, optimization of the land-rights system and improvement of market mechanisms for the circulation of land resources. From multidimensional perspectives linking affairs to policy, affairs to people and affairs to benefits, future studies can help

build a collaborative governance pattern in which the government provides guidance, the market plays a leading role and society participates, thereby promoting both equitable distribution and efficient use of land rights.

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