County and Township Level Territorial Spatial Planning System: Phenomena, Rationales, and Practical Framework

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Abstract: The county and township level territorial spatial planning system acts as a bridge between the central and local authorities in planning. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the issues confronting the current county-level territorial spatial planning, including unclear mandate, misassignment of authority, and inadequate policy transmission mechanism. It proposes reconstructing the county-level territorial spatial planning system based on political scale, administrative power distribution, and planning technology, with comprehensive consideration of regional differences and local circumstances. It synthesizes practices in diverse locations into four common types of county-township territorial spatial planning systems, including countytownship joint planning, town-village joint planning, separate county-township planning, and joint planning by multiple towns. Based on an analysis of the objectives, applicability, main characteristics, and key principles of the four planning types, the paper concludes that each type is suited to particular local circumstances. It stresses the importance of researching county and township level territorial spatial planning, with timely reflections on practices in leading regions in order to advance the theories in territorial spatial planning.
Keywords: county and township level territorial spatial planning system; county level territorial spatial planning; township level territorial spatial planning; planning transmission

County-level governments are the "interface" where a large number of national and local administrative powers are transferred. Land use planning at the county level and below is the most concentrated and basic level of planning authority [1]. Since the reform of land space planning, the state has clarified the "five-level three-category" land space planning system, issued guidelines for provincial and municipal land space planning, and released notices on detailed planning and village planning [2]. However, the state has not yet issued relevant requirements for county-level and township-level land space planning, instead encouraging local exploration based on actual conditions. In practice, many places have issued county-level and township-level land space planning guidelines, and many county-level land space master plans have been approved. The specific approaches may vary slightly, but preliminary results have been achieved. Regarding township-level land space planning, there are significant differences across regions, such as Sichuan Province's exploration of multi-town joint planning for regional-level land space master plans, Guangdong Province's exploration of township-level comprehensive planning, and some areas have yet to release guidelines for township-level land space master plans at the provincial level. Overall, there is still insufficient understanding of the county-town land space planning system in various places, such as inconsistent understanding of the levels of township land space planning and unclear relationships between unit-level detailed planning and township-level land space planning. In academic research, Peng Zhenwei et al. [2] emphasized the necessity of township-level land space master planning, Li Ruhai [3] proposed making township land space planning based on local conditions, with the option to delay or merge planning in special cases, Chen Meiqiu et al. [4] advocated for simultaneous preparation of county-town land space planning, Wang Xin-zhe et al. [1] argued that even when county and township plans are prepared

simultaneously, the outcomes of the two levels should be "separated," and Zhang Li et al. [5] believed that multiple types and modes of exploration should be allowed in township-level land space planning. Zhang Qiang et al. [6] discussed the relationship between county-level and township-level planning. These academic debates reflect the current lack of a unified understanding of the land space planning system at the county level and below, an unclear logic for constructing this system, and a lack of a systematic explanation of the different practices in various places. This paper focuses on the county-level and below land space planning system, which can be referred to as the "county-town land space planning system." This system includes planning types such as county-level land space master plans and special plans, township-level master plans and detailed plans, and village plans [4]. Through analyzing the current phenomena in the construction of the county-town land space planning system, it is suggested that regions should start from differences in the political-administrative scale (governance objects), administrative powers (governance subjects), and planning technical logic (governance methods), and explore a county-town land space planning system framework that aligns with local realities.

1. Analysis of the Phenomenon of the County-Town Land Spatial Planning System

1.1 Unclear System for the Preparation of County-Town Land Spatial Planning

Currently, influenced by the traditional inertia of different planning systems, most regions lack a comprehensive understanding of the county-town land spatial planning system, the hierarchical relationship between planning levels is unclear, the sequence and connection between various planning types are not well defined, and the relationship between newly explored planning methods and existing plans is also unclear.

1.1.1 Unclear Hierarchical Relationship Between County-Level and Township-Level Land Spatial Planning

The original land use planning emphasized joint preparation at the county-town level, while urban and rural planning emphasized separate overall plans at the county and township levels. Under the new land spatial planning system, there is a lack of a clear understanding of how to handle the relationship between county-level and township-level land spatial planning. On one hand, many regions have set up township-level land spatial planning, but they have not clearly defined the division of content between county-level and township-level planning. For example, influenced by the original urban-rural planning focus on "districts," most places include the planning content of central urban areas (town centers) in the county-level land spatial planning, without considering the relationship between "domain" and "district" from the perspective of planning system setup. On the other hand, some regions have not clarified whether to set up township-level land spatial planning, nor have they defined specific requirements for joint preparation of county-town land spatial planning, leading to a lack of connection between detailed planning and relevant plans.

1.1.2 Unclear Role of Special Planning in Coordinating and Connecting Special Contents

Due to the impact of the land spatial planning reform process, the preparation, approval mechanism, and post-approval management of various special plans still need improvement. The state has clearly stated that special plans should be prepared at the county level, and some provinces have issued special planning coordination management requirements. However, special planning is often delayed after the county-level land spatial master plan is approved. Since the county-level land spatial master plan "streamlines" the content and reduces some

specialized content to be addressed in special plans, if there is no horizontal connection of special plans, it will be difficult to effectively transmit to detailed plans. For example, in some regions, the "urgent first preparation" principle has been followed to carry out detailed planning at the township level, but the preparation sequence of the three types of plans—"general, special, and detailed"—does not match, making it difficult to effectively play the role of special planning in connection and transmission.

1.1.3 Unclear Relationship Between Unit-Level Detailed Planning and Township-Level Land Spatial Planning

The "Notice on Strengthening Land Spatial Detailed Planning" issued by the Ministry of Natural Resources explicitly mentions that detailed planning should transmit the strategic goals and other contents of the higher-level master plans. Some regions, when delineating units, combine administrative authority and divide townships into units, but the relationship between unit-level detailed planning and township land spatial planning is unclear, and whether there is functional overlap between the two lacks coordinated arrangements. Some regions directly carried out detailed planning under the "urgent first preparation" principle without carrying out unit-level detailed planning, leading to a lack of unit coordination in detailed planning at the implementation level. Additionally, the relationship between unit boundaries and urban development boundaries is unclear. For instance, some regions prepare detailed plans based on urban development boundaries, while others use unit boundaries for detailed planning, but there is a lack of effective connection methods for rural areas outside the urban development boundaries within the unit scope.

1.2 Unreasonable Allocation of Power in County and Township Land Use Planning

Due to the relatively complex administrative division system in China, there are still discrepancies between the allocation of planning development rights and approval powers and the public administrative powers of the government during the planning formulation and approval stages. This deviates from the principle of "one government level, one public power, and one plan."

1.2.1 Unreasonable Allocation of Planning Development Rights at Lower-Level Governments

Currently, the "three zones and three lines" demarcation work has been completed nationwide. When decomposing urban development boundary indicators, county-level governments often retain and reallocate the land use indicators to townships. Townships lack effective means of allocating planning development rights, which contrasts with the allocation of permanent basic farmland indicators. First, the urban development boundary at the township level is included in the county-level land spatial master plan and approved by the provincial government. Townships cannot make local adjustments unless there are changes in scale or violations of rigid control requirements, which is not conducive to county-level and township-level governments managing local affairs. In fact, much of this content belongs to local government public affairs, and it is more appropriate for the local government to handle and implement it. Second, the public administrative powers of lower-level governments are mismatched with their fiscal powers. For example, as permanent basic farmland and ecological protection red lines fall under national jurisdiction, local governments mainly play the role of "protection," but the national transfer compensation and subsidy mechanisms for areas with large proportions of permanent basic farmland and ecological protection red lines are still being improved. Lower-level governments lack adequate financial support for corresponding public powers.

1.2.2 Unreasonable Allocation of Planning Approval Powers at Higher-Level Governments

Reforms and innovations in the mandatory content of the overall spatial planning have always been crucial to improving the scientific and serious nature of planning. The majority of county-level land spatial master plans require approval from the provincial government, while some counties and cities can have their plans approved by the municipal government. The difference in approval levels affects the content of county-level land spatial master plans. Especially when county and township plans are separated, township government responsibilities are still included in the county-level land spatial master plan, which makes it difficult for provincial governments to make reasonable judgments during the approval process, leading to a certain "misalignment" of approval powers. For instance, the "Notice from the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Central Rural Work Leading Group Office on Learning from the Experience of the ‘10,000 Villages Project’ to Improve the Quality and Effectiveness of Village Planning" explicitly requires the promotion of a full-cycle management mechanism for village planning, including formulation, approval, implementation, and supervision. Currently, the optimization of the allocation of various permissions related to village planning formulation and approval across different levels of government is still ongoing.

1.3 The Inadequate Transmission Mechanism of Land Space Planning at County and Township Levels

Establishing a scientific and clear transmission system is an important prerequisite for ensuring the effectiveness of planning governance. At present, China has basically formed a control mode combining boundary baseline control and functional zoning guidance. Specifically, apart from the relatively clear mechanisms for policy transmission and indicator transmission, the mechanisms for key transmission modes such as control line transmission, layout transmission, and list transmission are still inadequate.

1.3.1 Inadequate Control Line Transmission Mechanism

With the reduction in the scale of planning, the spatial expression of plans has gradually shifted from highly generalized structural guidance to substantial expressions that can be measured in terms of actual area or length, that is, from “virtual indicators” to “actual indicators,” from “open” to “closed” [14]. How to achieve an appropriate balance has always been a challenge for transmitting baseline constraints. The transmission method for control lines should recognize that it is not always a "coordinate positioning line." It is advisable to distinguish the virtual and actual aspects of control lines at different planning levels, as well as their precision, in order to avoid conflicts between planning levels and repeated modifications. For example, with the "three zones and three lines," some regions have already experienced a demand for modifications to urban development boundaries. Recently, the Ministry of Natural Resources issued the "Notice on Managing Urban Development Boundaries (Trial)" [13], and each province has formulated corresponding implementation guidelines based on local conditions, proposing optimization and adjustment according to legal procedures. Due to limited increment space at the township level, the space within urban development boundaries has “less flexibility,” and the demand for adjustment of urban development boundaries has become more apparent in the short term. Therefore, further consideration is needed on the transmission mechanism for control lines of urban development boundaries, in terms of the virtual and actual aspects and precision at different levels.

1.3.2 Inadequate Layout Transmission Mechanism

Land use zoning is the main means of controlling land use in land space planning. Wang Xinze and

others [16] proposed a multi-level spatial zoning scheme, from the main functional zoning, land use zoning, to land classification corresponding to the "national-province-city-county-town" five-level spatial division. In the county-town land space planning system, the relationship between secondary land use zoning and land classification should be clearly defined. At present, in the exploration in various regions, insufficient attention is paid to the transmission rules between secondary land use zoning and land use classification. On one hand, in county-level land space planning, it is not clear which land use classifications can be matched or not matched with secondary land use zoning when compiling detailed unit plans. There is still a lack of effective layout transmission mechanisms. On the other hand, many places still focus on first determining land use classification in county-level land space general planning and then retroactively deducing secondary land use zoning. This approach lacks overall planning and scientific coordination for secondary land use zoning, leading to errors in county-level land planning where land use layouts are actually formed by combining the planning land uses of each detailed unit plan.

1.3.3 Inadequate Mechanism for the Transmission of Lists

Influenced by the traditional approach of merging county and township land use planning, the current land space planning system places too much emphasis on top-down control scales while neglecting the scale effects of planning at different levels. In particular, with regard to the list transmission mechanism, an effective feedback mechanism between higher and lower levels has yet to be established. In some regions, the overall land space plan at the county level, which was not integrated with the township-level land space planning, extends “all the way down,” incorporating all projects outside of the development boundary into the county plan. Since county-level plans must be approved by the provincial government, this makes it difficult for higher-level authorities to conduct substantial reviews of the list at the township level. Moreover, due to the overly detailed control at the county level, frequent revisions of the county-level plan are likely, which is not conducive to the implementation of the plan. At the same time, the question of whether adjustments and deepening of the list can be made during the formulation of the township-level land space plan has a significant impact on the status and role of the township-level planning.

2 Construction Logic of the County and Township Land Space Planning System

The rational distribution and utilization of land space is an important part of the public services provided by the government [17]. Planning activities are, in fact, a form of governance by the government, which refers to the governance of public affairs by the administrative system of the government, including its internal management [18]. Zhao Min [19] discusses the construction of the land space planning system from both administrative and technical perspectives. The author believes that the construction logic of the planning system can be further refined by integrating governance theory, distinguishing between the governance object and the governance subject from the administrative logic, and constructing the county and township land space planning system from three aspects: the administrative scale logic (governance object), administrative authority logic (governance subject), and planning technical logic (governance method).

2.1 Administrative Scale Logic (Governance Object): Considering the Impact of Administrative Characteristics and Spatial Scale on the County and Township Land Space Planning System

One of the key aspects of land space planning reform is clarifying the planning relationship

between different administrative regions in terms of "domain" and "area." In the county and township land space planning system, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between the county, county urban areas (townships), general township boundaries, town areas, and ecological and agricultural areas at different levels (Figure 1), in order to establish the basic governance object logic for the construction of the county and township land space planning system.

2.1.1 Considering the Impact of the Spatial Nature of County-Level Administrative Divisions on the Construction of the County and Township Land Space Planning System

In China, administrative divisions can be categorized into regional, urban, and mixed types [1]. The construction of the county and township land space planning system needs to focus on the differences in the nature of county-level administrative divisions and select an appropriate planning framework (Table 1). For regional county-level divisions, strategic guidance in planning should be emphasized, with a focus on how the overall plan is transmitted downward; for urban county-level divisions, the implementation of plans should be prioritized, considering the preparation of detailed plans under the guidance of higher-level planning; for mixed-type county-level divisions, a balance between strategic and implementation aspects should be achieved. The traditional method in urban and rural planning is to develop a general plan and central urban area planning for the county level, with detailed plans developed for townships outside the central urban area, serving as a reference for mixed-type administrative divisions.

2.1.2 Considering the Impact of Spatial Scale Differences of Townships on the Construction of the County-Township Land Spatial Planning System

China's rapid urbanization and high-speed economic development have led to diverse spatial organizational forms of townships, exhibiting both urban and rural characteristics in spatial scale [5]. From the perspective of the relationship between township areas and township districts (Figure 1), townships in China can be categorized into multi-district townships, single-district townships, and townships without distinct districts [20], with some regions even exploring township-level cities. Therefore, it is necessary to plan the preparation of township-level land spatial planning according to the spatial scale differences between the township area and the township district. It is precisely due to the diverse spatial scale differences of township administrative regions that the exploration of different practical frameworks for county-township land spatial planning systems becomes possible. For townships with larger spatial scales, it is still necessary to play the role of the "domain" in township-level land spatial planning, while for townships with smaller spatial scales, it can be explored to merge township-level land spatial master planning with the county level or with detailed planning, considering the "zone" management role.

2.2 Administrative Powers Logic (Governance Subjects): Exploring the Construction of the County-Township Land Spatial Planning System Based on the Perspective of "One-Level Government, One-Level Authority, One-Level Planning," and Matching it with Development Rights and Planning Powers

The preparation and implementation management of land spatial planning involves local development and is reflected in the local government’s power to lead and speak on planning, which is essentially a game and distribution of spatial development rights among different local entities [22]. Therefore, constructing the county-township land spatial planning system needs to consider the administrative powers logic of the governance subject and align with local government management requirements [11], so that the planning can truly become the guideline

for the government to manage public affairs related to land spatial governance.

2.2.1 Considering the Impact of Differences in Development Rights Allocation between Counties and Townships on the Construction of the County-Township Land Spatial Planning System

According to the administrative system, local governments can be divided into three types: administrative bodies, autonomous bodies, and mixed bodies [22]. Local governments in China are mixed bodies, similar to administrative bodies [5], and this type of local government emphasizes top-down implementation of planning requirements from higher-level governments. For a long time, most townships in China have mainly carried out functions assigned by higher-level governments [5], without true autonomous powers, while county-level governments are grassroots governments with complete administrative functions and are better suited to assume dual functions in the spatial governance system: implementing national control requirements and managing local development [1]. Currently, in the process of advancing governance capacity modernization, the country is strengthening county-level powers while further shrinking township-level powers. The earlier model, in which township industrialization was the main driver of local powers, can no longer adapt to the new national configuration of development rights. For instance, the recent national directive to make counties a key entry point for urban-rural integration and to accelerate new urbanization construction based on county towns has further strengthened the county-level government's role in coordinating development. Some regions are also continuously promoting reforms to township development rights. For example, in Zhejiang Province, the focus of township work has shifted to strengthening the county's coordination of economic development, gradually eliminating the township-level function of investment promotion and related assessment indicators [23]. Many regions have gradually abolished township-level industrial parks or selected key central towns within a specific service radius to retain industrial parks while radiating their influence to surrounding townships. It is evident that the position of small towns in the current socio-economic development has gradually declined, with a loss of development rights and corresponding powers, and if township-level land spatial planning continues to be established, its role will be significantly reduced. Therefore, regions need to choose an appropriate county-township land spatial planning system based on their own township development rights arrangements.

2.2.2 Consider the Impact of Differentiated Planning Responsibilities at County and Township Levels on the Construction of the Territorial Spatial Planning System

Different levels of planning reflect different levels of governmental responsibilities. Whether various actors in the planning process can exert synergistic effects under clear delineation of responsibilities directly impacts the effectiveness of planning preparation and implementation [17]. First, territorial spatial planning responsibilities include rights and obligations across four stages: preparation, approval, implementation, and supervision [24]. The setting of county and township planning responsibilities significantly influences the construction of the planning system. It is necessary to further clarify these responsibilities, establish institutionalized rules for responsibility allocation, and improve mechanisms for dynamically adjusting planning responsibilities [21].

For instance, under the premise of clearly delineating planning responsibilities between county and township levels, consideration should be given to both the direction and intensity of responsibility allocation:Direction: From top-down, determining which elements need to be implemented by lower levels; and from bottom-up, identifying elements requiring clarification

from higher levels, such as strategic positioning, planning goals, and the overall territorial spatial framework.

Intensity: Considering, from a rigid management perspective, which elements require centralized control, and from a flexible governance perspective, which elements should retain market elasticity to avoid the dilemma of "over-control stifling development or excessive flexibility causing disorder" [5].

Second, from the perspective of optimizing governmental governance, it is necessary to streamline planning levels further. For instance, the cancellation of township-level territorial spatial planning may be allowed in constructing the county-township territorial spatial planning system, retaining only the county-level planning framework. An example is Suzhou's Wujiang District in Jiangsu Province, which conducted a pilot program for county-wide detailed planning (village planning). This included delineating unit areas and actively exploring detailed planning (village planning) organized under county-level coordination, essentially a step toward weakening township-level territorial spatial planning.

2.3 Planning Technical Logic (Governance Approach): Considering the Impact of Content Division among Planning Types to Explore the Construction of a "General-Specific-Detailed" County-Township Territorial Spatial Planning System

The division of planning types aims to form differentiated content through the transmission and coordination among various planning types. This enables the distinction of upper-level and same-level planning approval responsibilities, avoiding overly complex content and facilitating the preparation and approval process.

The county-level unit is the concentrated region for compiling three types of plans—general, detailed, and specialized plans [25]. Coordinating the relationships among these three types of plans is crucial for constructing the county-township territorial spatial planning system.

From the perspective of planning type transmission, the county-township territorial spatial planning system needs to coordinate three transmission "interfaces," namely:General-Detailed Interface, General-Specific Interface, Specific-Detailed Interface⑤.

2.3.1 General-Detailed Interface: Focusing on Coordination of Central-Local Power Struggles

The general-detailed interface is the interface for the transition of national spatial governance power to local spatial governance power [1]. It is often misunderstood as involving two levels of planning authority, but in fact, detailed planning is the main “interface” for coordination and negotiation of spatial rights between the government and the market [26]. Therefore, the general planning and detailed planning should be understood as different types of plans, rather than different levels of planning. The general-detailed interface needs to focus on three main aspects:

Correctly distinguishing the content focus of the overall planning and detailed planning. The overall planning should focus on the strategic and coordinated aspects for the entire county, while the implementation aspects should be addressed by detailed planning. Therefore, overly detailed powers should be avoided in the county-level spatial overall planning.

In the process of transferring from the overall planning to detailed planning, this can be done through township-level planning or through the preparation of detailed plans at the unit level, which then transfer to the implementation level detailed planning.

Consider promoting the management of detailed planning with full territorial coverage, including the coordination of urban construction space, rural construction space, and non-construction space, and gradually promoting full coverage of urban unit detailed planning and village planning

in regions where conditions allow.

2.3.2 General-Specialized Interface: Focusing on Horizontal Division of Planning Content

The general-specialized interface needs to resolve the issue of the “all-encompassing” nature of the overall planning, simplifying and refining the spatially related and in-depth content in various specialized plans, and establishing a clear and orderly division of labor and power boundaries in the preparation and approval management system of specialized plans [26]. The general-specialized interface should focus on three main aspects:

Coordinating the synchronization of the preparation of overall planning and specialized planning, promoting coordination among different specialized plans, and forming a "joint planning, joint management, and shared use" model for different departments, which is coordinated under one “map” in a unified strategy [12].

Differentiating between the core content that should be included in the overall planning and the content that should be included in the specialized plans. For example, Jiangsu Province has clearly specified that the township and village layout plans should be prepared at the county level to further coordinate the development pattern of townships and villages in the county [27], thus slimming down the content in the county-level spatial overall planning, and no longer including classifications of natural villages that do not fall under this level’s authority.

Clarifying the transfer method between the overall planning and specialized planning, placing the “general” content of specialized planning into the county-level spatial overall planning for coordination, and specifying how to transfer to specialized planning using methods such as indicator transfer, layout transfer, and list transfer.

2.3.3 Specialized-Detailed Interface: Focusing on Defining Spatial Scope at the Parcel Level

Due to the relative lag in the preparation of specialized planning, there has been little discussion on the transfer relationship between specialized planning and detailed planning. The specialized-detailed interface should focus on two main aspects:

Specialized plans need to specify the spatial layout standards, area, and specific location range of the facilities to be implemented. In detailed planning, the spatial needs outlined in various specialized plans for different departments should be clarified and coordinated within the space, truly realizing “integration of multiple plans” [26]. Nanjing has explored specialized plans at the detailed planning level in recent years, focusing on specialized planning for land control to better guide the preparation of detailed planning [28].

Specialized planning should guide detailed planning. For example, Jiangsu Province uses the township and village layout plans as specialized plans for county-level coordination of rural space optimization, continually promoting refined planning management, and dynamically adjusting village classifications. This provides a more scientific and coordinated guide for the development of detailed planning (village planning), preventing the problem of discussing only the village in isolation when preparing the village plan [27].

3. Practice Framework of County and Township Land Spatial Planning System

Based on the logical differences in administrative boundaries, administrative powers, and planning techniques mentioned earlier, and in combination with the actual development of counties and townships, the author believes that common practical frameworks for county and township land spatial planning can include four types: county-township joint preparation, town-village joint preparation, separate preparation for county and township, and multi-town

connected preparation (Table 2). In practice, some county-level units may have some townships preparing their own plans while others do not. This situation can lead to mismatches in management powers [1].

3.1 County-Township Joint Preparation: Joint Preparation of County and Township Land Spatial Master Plans to Enhance the Leading Role of County-level Overall Development

County-township joint preparation refers to integrating the content of township-level land spatial planning into the county-level planning while preparing the county's overall land spatial planning, rather than preparing separate township-level land spatial plans. The state has clearly stated that "localities may adapt to local conditions and merge city and county with township land spatial planning," which provides policy support for the joint preparation of county and township land spatial planning. This framework is county-led, with a single level of governance, and includes horizontal coordination of county-level overall land spatial planning, special planning, and detailed planning (Figure 2). Although this framework has been explored less frequently so far, and some county-level land spatial master plans have already been compiled and approved, as mentioned earlier, many county-level units have included township-level plans in their project lists, reflecting partial county-township joint preparation. The main purpose of promoting county-township joint preparation is to adapt to the trend of simplifying township powers, further centralizing planning powers at the county level, and achieving the separation of approval powers at different levels through the division of contents in master, special, and detailed planning. This framework focuses on three main aspects:

The content of the county-level land spatial master plan, which should not only include basic content such as the three zones and three lines, county-level urban system, county-level resource protection, and county-level factor support, but also focus on the secondary zoning of township urban units and the project lists for township territories;

Detailed planning needs to be subdivided into unit-level detailed planning and implementation-level detailed planning. The unit-level plan should fully analyze and delineate the units, and the implementation-level plan should fully reflect the strategic objectives, bottom-line control, functional layout, spatial structure, and resource utilization as required by the master plan. This framework aligns well with the current national reform efforts in detailed planning;

The comprehensive detailed planning should be organized around unit delineation. Detailed planning for urban and rural units (village planning) should explore integrated preparation models, avoiding the problem of having two separate planning systems for urban and rural areas.

The advantage of this framework is that it helps in the arrangement of overall development rights across the entire region, with a high level of coordination for resource allocation across the county. It can effectively balance the contradictions and demands of different townships, while addressing the problem of coordinating land use between departments at the county level and ensuring the implementation of township-level plans [4]. Especially when the urban boundary of townships has been defined, there is actually little content that needs to be researched and determined through the master plan for the township space. This framework is more suitable for two types of county-level units: one is the county unit with overall urbanization, with an urban governance structure; the other is a county unit where development opportunities are mainly concentrated in the county town, with weak township functions, high population outflow, and generally low governance levels, such as remote counties in the central and western regions.

3.2 Joint Compilation of Town and Village: Deep Coordination of Rural Land Use Planning with

Detailed Planning, Helping to Coordinate and Allocate Existing Construction Resources Across the Entire Town

Joint compilation of town and village refers to integrating the overall planning of towns and villages with detailed planning, using detailed planning for in-depth coordination. This includes the overall land use planning of towns, detailed planning of urban units, and village planning, essentially forming a comprehensive result for the entire town domain. The framework remains at a single level, creating a county-level land use planning system that coordinates county-level overall planning, specialized planning, and comprehensive town planning. See Figure [3].

The main goal of promoting joint compilation of towns and villages is to strengthen the town's ability to coordinate spatial resources and the synergy between town and village development, further coordinating the allocation of cultivated land and rural revitalization construction space, and exploring mechanisms for the orderly configuration of existing construction resources in rural areas. This framework focuses on two main aspects: First, the county-level overall land use planning should pay more attention to planning content at the county level, considering the spatial development pattern for the entire county, while at the town level, it should focus on coordinating basic rigid control elements such as the "three zones and three lines"; Second, the detailed planning at the town level should focus on the coordinated use of existing construction land throughout the town, while also integrating it with land policies for comprehensive land remediation and village-related land policies to ensure the full coordination of spatial resources in the town domain.

The advantage of this framework is that it helps to exploit existing resources in town and village areas, optimize the spatial configuration of towns, and, while achieving the intensive and efficient use of land in the town, further stimulates the vitality of town development. This framework is suitable for areas where town development authority is relatively well-established, and where town planning governance is strong, such as in the developed coastal counties of eastern China. For instance, Guangdong Province is exploring this practice framework, selecting 20 towns with good work foundations, high enthusiasm, and urgent rural construction land needs to implement the joint town-village planning through detailed planning for the overall land use of towns.

3.3 Separate Compilation of County and Town Planning: Separate Compilation of County-level and Town-level Land Use Plans, Helping Adapt to Administrative Systems and Promote County-Town Authority Reforms

Separate compilation of county and town refers to the separate compilation of county-level and town-level land use plans, forming two levels: the county-level overall plan and specialized plans, and the town-level overall plan, detailed planning for urban units (this can be understood as the detailed planning for towns), and village planning (Figure [4]). This framework essentially follows the previous urban-rural planning model, where the land use planning powers at the county and town levels are separate. However, in some regions, town-related land use planning content is still included in the county-level plans.

The main goal of promoting separate compilation of county and town planning is to adapt to the need for the division of county and town administrative powers. This framework focuses on two main aspects: First, the county-level overall land use plan should further simplify the planning content for towns, especially in counties with mixed administrative districts; second, before compiling town-level land use plans, it is necessary to consider the further delegation of planning authority to the town level, including exploring whether town-level land use planning should be

approved by the county government, to avoid situations where there are no town-level planning powers but town-level land use plans are still being compiled.

The advantage of this framework lies in its strong adaptability to our administrative system, as it can promote county-township power reforms and contribute to the implementation of China's "five levels and three categories" of land and space planning system. This framework is applicable to areas where townships have a relatively large spatial scale and strong development capacity, particularly those with regional or mixed administrative district attributes, especially in regions promoting township-level city reforms. Currently, many county-level units have adopted this framework, especially in areas where provincial-level guidelines for preparing township land spatial planning have been issued[29], and after the approval of county-level land spatial plans, these counties have begun to explore the preparation of township-level land spatial planning.

3.4 Multi-town Joint Planning: Coordinating the Land Spatial Planning for Multiple Townships in Proximity to Foster Strong Growth Points

Multi-town joint planning refers to coordinating the preparation of land spatial plans for several townships that are geographically close and interdependent. This framework consists of two levels: county-level and district-level, forming a land spatial planning system that includes county-level land spatial planning, special planning, and detailed planning, as well as district-level land spatial planning, detailed urban unit planning, and village planning. See Figure [5].

The main goal of promoting multi-town joint planning is to address the issue of insufficient development momentum in some townships and to promote the integrated development of related townships, further optimizing the spatial development structure of the county. The key to multi-town joint planning is strong administrative support, which also lays the groundwork for the next round of township administrative adjustments. This framework focuses on three key aspects: first, analyzing the township development pattern at the county-level land spatial planning level, planning the areas for integrated township development, and identifying key township development priorities within each district; second, authorizing planning powers for the district, exploring the establishment of relevant administrative structures, such as various types of administrative committees[21], to allow the district to effectively play a coordinating role; third, pushing for district-level planning to be approved by the local government to avoid the situation where both county-level and district-level planning are approved by the same authority, which would result in planning of the same level but divided content.

The advantage of this framework is that it helps guide the full flow, reasonable concentration, and optimized allocation of public resources and market elements, thereby cultivating more development-active townships and creating new engines with strong support and driving capacity in the county, providing more growth points for the county. This framework is particularly suitable for mixed administrative districts, areas with relatively low township development balance, and counties with relatively large spatial scales but small township scales. For example, in Sichuan Province, where township administrative areas are small and have not gone through the previous round of township mergers, most townships are single-township areas. To promote further reform, Sichuan has carried out the preparation of land spatial planning for townships by district units to provide more space for rural revitalization and new urbanization.

4 Conclusion and Outlook

4.1 Key Points and Conclusions

In the process of national land space planning reform, there is an urgent need to combine local practices and re-examine and clarify the county and township land space planning system, so as to provide a reference for the next step in the reform. Based on existing research, this paper mainly proposes the following three points: First, the country recognizes that the construction of the county and township land space system cannot be "one size fits all," but encourages local areas to actively explore. Different regions can explore appropriate practice frameworks based on their regional spatial nature, the spatial scale of administrative divisions, county and township development rights, the setting of county and township planning authorities, and the division of content between different planning types (Figure 6). Second, the hierarchical land space overall planning at the township level is not necessarily required, and its planning results do not necessarily need to be presented separately. Under the condition that the township authorities are sufficiently simplified and the development rights of townships are shrinking, the township-level land space planning can be combined with the county-level land space overall planning or combined with the detailed planning of the entire township. Third, four common frameworks compatible with the construction logic of the county and township land space planning system are proposed. It is believed that there is no superiority or inferiority in choosing a specific framework in practice, only whether it is suitable or not. The key is to match it with government authorities, coordinate with the preparation, approval, implementation, and supervision processes, and align with the local economic and social development level and government governance capacity.

4.2 Outlook: Suggestions for Optimizing and Improving the County and Township Land Space Planning System

To support the national land space planning reform, local areas need to actively explore and further improve the relevant systems and mechanisms in the construction of the county and township land space planning system. The following five suggestions are made to optimize the county and township land space planning system: First, accelerate the reform of administrative powers at the county and township levels. Planning powers should be assigned according to the economic and social development potential of townships. For larger towns, reforms should be carried out through town-level cities, granting corresponding planning powers, so that land space planning can be implemented at the township level. For ordinary townships, further simplification of powers should be explored, and the township-level land space planning tier can gradually be abolished. Second, the results of the county-level land space overall planning should focus on studying the county and township land space planning system of the county unit, and this should be clearly specified in the transmission chapters of the planning results, strictly following the established system in practice and exploration, ensuring that this provision is not just a formality. Third, each region should actively explore suitable local planning transmission mechanisms, especially further improving the content and methods of transmission between county-level "overall—specialized—detailed" transmission and "county-level—township-level" transmission. Based on clarifying powers, a deepening and optimizing system should be built step by step. Fourth, as the county and township land space planning is an implementation-level planning in the "five-level, three-category" system, special attention should be given to the status and role of detailed planning. Further research should be conducted on the delineation, overall preparation, and planning implementation and management mechanisms of local detailed planning units to ensure that planning is effectively implemented. Fifth, attention should be paid

to the relationship between planning implementation and policy integration, especially in detailed planning. It is crucial to link it with policies such as land preparation, comprehensive land remediation, collective operating construction land entering the market, and stock renewal, so that planning can truly become a policy for government public affairs governance. The road to land space planning reform is long and challenging. Only by proactive actions from all levels of entities and active exploration in practice can a path with Chinese characteristics be paved for the construction of the land space planning system, providing land space support for high-quality development in the new era.

Notes

①The "Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Establishing the National Land Spatial Planning System and Supervising Its Implementation" clarifies the "five levels and three categories" of the land spatial planning system, which refers to the national level, provincial level, municipal level, county level, and township level as the five levels, and the three categories are the overall plan, special plans, and detailed plans.

②In recent years, the country has issued documents such as the "Notice on Strengthening Village Planning to Promote Rural Revitalization" (Natural Resource Office Document [2019] No. 35), "Opinions on Further Improving Village Planning Work" (Natural Resource Office Document [2020] No. 57), "Notice on Strengthening the Detailed Planning Work of Land Space" (Natural Resources Office Document [2023] No. 43), and "Notice on Learning from the Experience of the 'Ten Thousand Projects' to Improve the Quality and Effectiveness of Village Planning" (Natural Resources Office Document [2024] No. 1), which clearly define the management requirements for detailed planning and village planning.

③Some scholars refer to the land spatial planning system at or below the county level as the "county-level land spatial planning system". Compared with the "county and township land spatial planning system", this article argues that the term "county-level" is closer to county-level land spatial planning and overlooks the content of township-level planning. The term "county and township" is easier to understand as including both county and township land spatial planning.

④The "Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Establishing the National Land Spatial Planning System and Supervising Its Implementation" explicitly states that "each region should formulate township land spatial plans according to local conditions," and "regions may combine municipal and county-level land spatial planning with township-level planning, or combine several townships as units to formulate township-level land spatial plans," and "relevant special plans may be formulated at the national, provincial, and municipal levels" and "detailed plans should be formulated at the municipal and lower levels."

⑤The county-township overall-detailed interface refers to the interface through which the county-level land spatial overall plan transmits to detailed planning, the county-township overall-special interface refers to the interface through which the county-level land spatial overall plan transmits to the county-level special plans, and the county-township special-detailed interface refers to the interface through which the county-level special plans transmit to detailed plans.

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