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# The Sustainable Development of Land-Lost Peasants' Citizenization: A Case Study of Dongbang Town, China

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**Abstract:** Urbanization can be categorized as “spontaneous” and “compulsory” according to its mode of occurrence. In the latter case, the local government acquires the agricultural land and then promotes the transformation of the land-lost peasants to urban residents by enforcing various policy combinations. Based on an empirical case analysis of compulsory urbanization in China, this study proposes that the material assistance and guarantee mechanism provided by the local government is of great significance in the process of rapid conversion of land-lost peasants to citizens. However, the local government needs to continue adopting various policy measures to support the land-lost peasants in order to further adapt to urban life and develop their identities as urban citizens. The local government should also maintain the balance between “compulsive” and “spontaneous” policy styles in the midst of urbanization, and transform the concept of urbanization from “economy-oriented” to “people-oriented”.

**Keywords:** urbanization; land-lost peasants; urban citizen; governance; local government

## 1. Introduction

The sustainable development of cities is closely related to the process of urbanization. Urbanization in western countries in the context of private ownership of land is characterized by a natural urbanization process. Under the influence of market mechanism, peasants' careers, lifestyles, and habits have naturally been transformed. In this process, the government mainly plays the role of service, which is to optimize various public facilities of the city and provide better public services to its residents.

Compared with the “natural” urbanization of the Western society, the urbanization procedure in China has demonstrated complexity since the Reform and Opening-up. For one thing, like westerners, there are rural people who naturally migrate to cities for a job change. For another, the expansion of the urban land shows the dominant position of the government's initiative planning and policies in the process of urbanization. In China, although the collective land in rural areas is owned collectively by peasants, they do not have the right to trade, and the property rights are owned ultimately by the state. If the land collectively owned by peasants is to be traded, it must be acquired by the local government. Peasants get compensation based on the local annual output value, instead of the real-time market price. Generally speaking, there is a huge difference between the compensation for land requisition and market transactions, which could result in the local governments' strong profit

motive [1]. The regulation system in China gives the local government more power over society. They can formulate policies and plans, acquire local land, and relocate peasants to newly designated living areas. The central government requires local governments to protect peasants' property during land requisition, providing reasonable compensation, and not to use violent or illegal means to affect social stability. However, local governments with power, fiscal and other policy resources in control, can exert a significant influence over the peasants [2].

In the process of urbanization in China, the urbanization of peasant workers constitutes the most important task. "Peasant workers' citizenization is a process and phenomenon, of which rural migrant workers overcome various obstacles and finally transform into citizens gradually. [3]" The methods taken by local governments in China's urbanization have produced a large number of land-lost peasants in various places. According to the investigation, "between 1990 and 2008, governments expropriated more than 4.2 million hectares of rural land for urban growth" [4]. In summary, these land-lost peasants show the following characteristics: (1) they lost their land; (2) their land loss was caused by urbanization, not for other reasons such as natural disasters; (3) they become urban residents passively, since their land is acquired by the government, not traded by themselves; (4) they are living in urban areas with urban Hukou (registered permanent residence)" [5]. After the land is acquired, peasants can no longer maintain their original lifestyle, but need to adapt to the new city life. How to ensure that these people could be integrated into urban life quickly without being abandoned by social development, and achieve sustainable development has become an important research topic in China's urbanization process.

China's unique urbanization procedure results in both positive and negative consequences. Local governments play a proactive role in expanding the scale of urbanization. Since the Reform and Opening-up, a large number of peasants have moved to cities. With the status of transforming into citizens, their standard of living has also improved greatly. The proportion of the urban population had grown from 19.4% to 58.52% over the period from 1978 to 2017. China's urban population exceeded the rural population for the first time in the country's history in 2011, and over 56% of the total population in China resided in urban areas in 2015. [6] According to the official United Nations projections, for instance, China's urban population is expected to increase from 636 million to 1037 million between 2010 and 2050 [7]. Nevertheless, "a high degree of urbanization does not necessarily signify a more advanced level of human development" [8]. There are also some negative effects during China's urbanization stage, such as "huge urban-rural disparity", "urbanization lags behind industrialization", "population urbanization lags behind land urbanization," "inefficient and wasteful land use," "emergence of 'urban diseases', and 'rural diseases'" [9].

This study aims to explore whether, in recent years, and with the background of government-led urbanization, to what extent has China's land-lost peasants realized the transformation from peasant identity to urban-citizen identity, and whether this new urban-citizen can achieve sustainable development in the new urban environment, which is extremely important for assessing the quality and future development of China's urbanization. At the same time, the study also provides an experimental demonstration to explore the Chinese path of sustainable urban development. In order to achieve the research aims, this paper will focus on analyzing typical cases in the process of urbanization in China as well as discussing their implications.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of sustainable development has been in use since the 1970s [10]. According to the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, it refers to "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [11]. This concept was initially mainly applied in the field of environmental protection, but with the deepening of research, it gradually included economic development, higher education, social development, and other subjects. Among studies in this field, the sustainable development of cities has been receiving increasing attention. By bringing people, investment, and resources together, there are increased possibilities for

social-economic development, innovation, and social interaction in cities. The emergence of sustainable development as a popular concept stems from discussions about the “City form” [12]. The World Economic and Social Survey 2013—Sustainable Development Challenges—is a milestone on this topic, which has not only listed some of the major journals covering relevant research but also included a report from the UN Center for Human Settlements and World Health Organizations. The research topics in it are about urban issues. These studies have also covered different urbanization scales from global to local levels, with cases from the southern hemisphere to the northern hemisphere, summarizing the framework of urban sustainability as four pillars, namely, economic development, social development, environmental management, and active urban governance [13]. An index system has been constructed with five dimensions: society, the economy, the environment, resources, and the technology to measure the degree of sustainable development of the city [14]. Besides, with the development of the economic knowledge, there are also studies addressing the sustainable development of smart cities [15] and discussing how to maintain the sustainable development of urban innovation from industrial cities to knowledgeable cities [16].

There are mainly two crucial topics in the study of sustainable urban development. One is the contribution of local governments to the promotion of sustainable urban systems. Just as the Innovation Network for Communities asserted, “the role of local governments in the sustainability of cities occupies a unique position” [17]. The local authorities could help societies achieve specific livable goals as they can feasibly implement sustainable development measures, and adopt a sustainable framework to encourage cities to grow within ecological limits. They are also able to cope with the challenges that threaten the capabilities of sustainable development. For example, by increasing the availability and effective use of public services, reducing ecological damage and financial vulnerability, as well as building flexibility, the adverse effects of natural disasters are countered [13]. The other critical topic is immigration and urbanization. In modern society, more and more people are moving into cities which makes it possible to lower the cost of providing public services, such as water, sanitation, healthcare, education, electricity and emergency services, and public leisure areas. In many developing countries, the main challenge for poorly cared urban residents, including residents of large cities, is to provide adequate public services and job opportunities [13].

Research on sustainable urban development has given more heed to the urbanization of developing countries. “Today, almost 400 cities contain a million people or more, and about 70% of them are found in the developing world” [18]. A number of studies have noted that the urban population’s growth in many developing countries has exceeded the needs and capacity of municipal governments to improve, which is in contrast to the relevant indicators in developed countries. “More than half of its population is living below the poverty line and public spending is dependent on foreign aid and intermittent oil revenues” [19]. Moreover, a few studies on the sustainable development of Chinese cities find that the development shows different characteristics from the western countries. Just as Looney and Rithmire [20] proposed, “Unlike market-dependent and voluntary immigrants, the Chinese Communist Party manipulates the process of urbanization by controlling land, labor, and capital. If it succeeds, China could enable hundreds of millions of people to achieve urbanization within a few decades. The country does not have to experience the social and political chaos brought about by the actual practice of urbanization in the past. If it fails, the risk of a simple economic stagnation can create political and social disturbances.”

A growing number of studies have also addressed how land-lost peasants integrate into cities in the process of urbanization in China. For example, by taking 561 land-lost peasants in Nanjing as an example, Zhang and Tong [5] studied peasants’ “self-identification” in the process of urbanization, pointing out that changes in “time” and “space” are key factors hindering the “self-identification.” Tian [21] studied the adaptability of migrant workers to urban life, identifying that this group show a state of differentiation in their adaptation to city life due to the influence of many different factors. Qi and Qian [22] pointed out that the land-lost peasants are in a vulnerable position in urban life because of their lack of social networks, which affect their recognition of citizenship. Some other

studies have revealed the negative phenomenon of organizing land-lost peasants through violence in the development of urbanization in China [4].

Through the above literature review, it could be seen that related studies on the sustainable development of land-lost peasants in the process of urbanization has demonstrated two essential features: firstly, local governments in developing countries play an important role in promoting the sustainable development of cities and function as a significant factor in the study of sustainable development of cities; secondly, the basic manners of land-lost peasants have a huge impact on their urban integration.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

For the citizenization of land-lost peasants, four important factors are involved: the Center government and Provincial government, economic and social development, local government, and land-lost peasants. The key causal relationship concerned is the impact of local government's public policies on the citizenization of land-lost peasants, as shown in Figure 1:

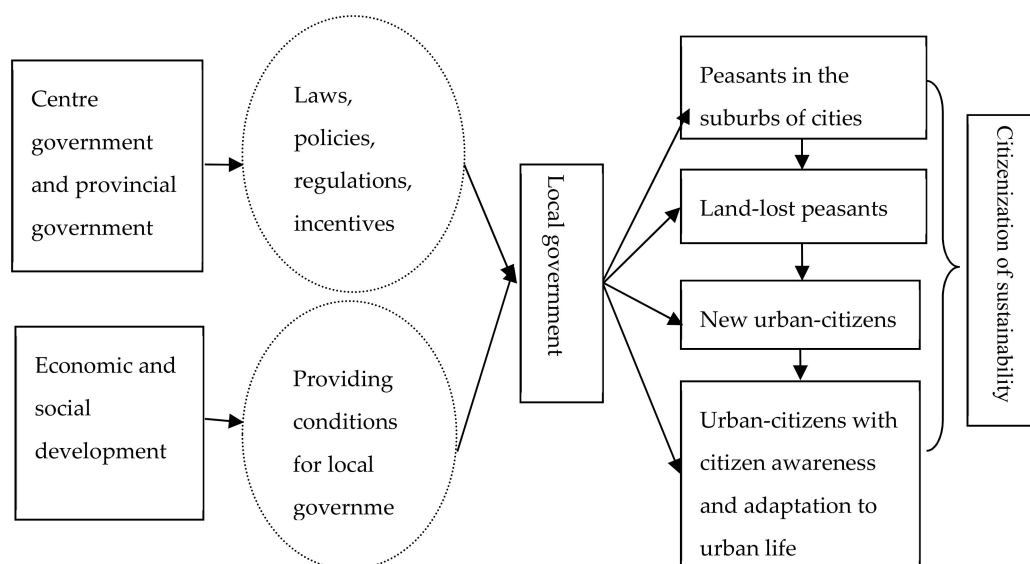


Figure 1. Impact of local government policies on the citizenization process.

The local government studied in this paper is a part of the Chinese unified government system. Due to China's pressure-based government structure, the central government and local governments, such as provinces, cities, towns, and counties constitute a top-down authority relationship. Local governments have jurisdiction over personnel, finance, and economic management within their communities. The higher-level government implements the "objective responsibility system" [23] to the lower-level government, and monitors local government's performance via a performance appraisal, which holds the local government responsible for the higher-level government, and sets it to fulfill the policy objectives set by the higher-level government. Of course, the local governments are required to abide by the regulations established by the central government and the higher level of government, such as environmental protection, social stability, and economic development.

The citizenization of land-lost peasants is manifested in the transformation of peasant status to citizenship. In academic terms, identity contains two interrelated meanings: "social" and "private". In the former sense, "identity" refers to a social category, which is defined by a label or by many rules to determine membership, similar characteristics, and attributes. In the latter sense, "identity" suggests a unique feature that allows an individual to be more proud of the relatively constant social consequences [24]. Alternatively, the former could be summarized as an external social attribute and the latter an intrinsic spiritual factor.

Similarly, the concept of “peasant” also includes two interrelated meanings, one referring to “people who are engaged in agricultural production,” and the other indicating not only a profession but also an identity or quasi-identity, a kind of organization of the community and society, a cultural model and psychological structure. The whole way of life and labor of the peasants are attached to the land, and the land is the foundation for the peasants to make a living. If the peasants lose their land, it means that the peasants’ way of making a living and lifestyle will undergo fundamental changes. To peasants, land means resources, property, and insurance. Land-lost peasants refer to people who have the right to use and manage their rural collective land but lost some or all of their land in the process of urbanization initiated by local governments. In this sense, they are the “products” of local governments. “Urban-citizen” means a resident who currently lives in cities and has urban household registration actually enjoying various rights in China. As an “urban citizen”, one not only needs to live in urban areas but also need to have a life closely connected to the market economy.

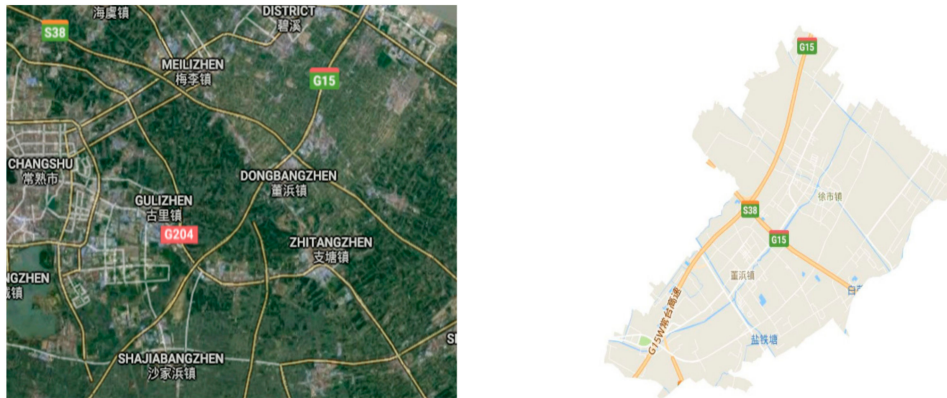
Therefore, the transformation process of peasants to urban-citizens includes not only the transition of occupational status from agriculture to non-agricultural but also the migration of living space from rural to urban areas. It also includes the reconstruction of many social relationships and the adaptation to urban life, as well as the transformation of social and cultural attributes, and their role connotation [25]. Based on the theoretical analysis above, this study outlines an analytical framework for studying, the transformation from land-lost peasants to urban-citizens. We will measure the degree of citizenization of land-lost peasants from the four dimensions of “housing and social security,” “employment and income status,” “political and social participation” and “life satisfaction and urban-citizen identification.”

#### 4. Research Methods and Case Selection

This paper takes a single case approach [26] to explore the sustainable development of land-lost peasants’ citizenization. In the study, we mainly adopted the personal in-depth interview method, with 2–3 researchers conducting a semi-structured interview and recording the content. From May 2017 to December 2018, the research team conducted 60 hours of interviews in total. The interviewees included 10 peasants whose land was acquired for resettlement, and three government officials who were policy-makers responsible for land expropriation and resettlement of land-lost peasants (two leading members of Changshu City responsible for the construction of urban and rural integration, and the mayor of Dongbang Town who participated in government decision-making), five policy executives in Dongbang Town (three from the demolition office in charge of land acquisition and housing demolition, and two from resettlement office in charge of landless peasants’ resettlement in the new district). The team also conducted 10 hours of telephone interviews altogether and collected more than 100 documents. In order to collect a broader range of data, the research team designed questionnaires based on “housing and social security,” “employment and income status,” “political and social participation”, and “life satisfaction and citizen identification.” In total, 1000 questionnaires were distributed to land-lost peasants through direct and entrusted distribution. Among them, 928 were recovered, and 897 were valid. Recovery and efficiency rates were 92.8% and 89.7%, respectively. A public official of Dongbang Town Government was responsible for the property demolition and resettlement of land-expropriated peasants, which created favorable conditions for data collection. The above investigations ensure the reliability and validity of the collected data.

In terms of geographical location and natural conditions, as shown in Figure 2, Dongbang Town is located in Changshu City, Jiangsu Province, at the intersection of “Three Roads and One Bridge”, namely, Sujiahang Expressway, Yanjiang Expressway, Changkun Expressway, and Sutong Yangtze River Bridge. The town covers an area of 62.5 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 54,000. There has been 14 administrative villages and two municipal and town neighborhood committees by 2017. As a pioneer and demonstration area in the construction of modern Changshu City, Dongbang Town has made significant progress in rural urbanization through years of development and construction. In this process, in order to meet the needs of land use in its economic development, Changshu Municipal

Government has imposed expropriation on the land. Many peasants in Dongbang Town have lost their land, as it was acquired by the government for enterprise construction. By November 2017, more than 20,000 rural laborers in Dongbang Town, with a permanent population of 54,000, were landless. Changshu Municipal Government has also taken a series of safeguard measures to actively help the land-lost peasants' re-employment, promoting them to adapt to the new urban-citizen life and transforming their identity into an urban citizenship.



(a) The location of Dongbang Town, Changshu City on Google map (b) The map of the administrative division of Dongbang Town

**Figure 2.** Map of Dongbang Town, Changshu, China.

## 5. Key Findings

### 5.1. Major Policy Measures for Promoting the Citizenization of Land-Lost Peasants in Dongbang Town, Changshu City

Since the requisition of the agricultural land in Dongbang Town, the authorities have adopted a series of measures to ensure the citizenization of land-lost peasants. There are five main approaches.

First, the local authorities formulate measures of resettlement compensation for land-lost peasants. According to the corresponding compensation procedure, financial compensation is then carried out to ensure the stability of life and mentality of land-lost peasants. In the process of rural reconstruction, the compensation and resettlement work that are related to property demolition has been practiced according to national standards and Jiangsu provincial standards, where the displaced peasants are free to choose either monetary or property compensation. When the demolished land is used for the construction of commercial housing, the landowner who chooses monetary compensation is granted the right of preemption. In terms of compensation standards, it is based on the 2014 Changshu City Land Acquisition Compensation and Social Security Measures for Land-expropriated Peasants. In recent years, a total amount of 1900 acres of land were acquired in Dongbang Town, with the compensation of 120 million yuan and a residential resettlement area of more than 440,000 square meters (some are still under construction) all together. A total number of 4034 people have been given a minimum living allowance, which is in accordance with the proper placement of peasants, and married women have also got collective land compensation income and equal treatment.

Second, the local authorities have given these peasants civil registration. In China, the fundamental system for distinguishing between peasants and urban-citizens is the household registration system. "Hukou registration not only provided the principal basis for establishing identity, citizenship and proof of official status, but it was also essential for every aspect of daily life" [27]. Before the Reform and Opening-up, the difference in the household registration system meant different social security, the supply of goods, and other rights. After the Reform and Opening-up, different household registration still meant different enjoyment of Public services. Residents with urban household registration have a high-quality education, medical care, social security, environment, and housing. Therefore,

citizenization means that peasants will lose their rights and benefits connected to the collective land they own. However, as they become urban citizens, they will obtain social security, medical security, children's school enrollment, public services, and even specific employment opportunities with their new urban household registration. With the requisition of land, some people become land-lost peasants. With the development of local enterprises, some people's occupations have turned to non-agricultural status. In essence, these peasants have already had the conditions for citizenization, and can transfer their household registration to civil registration. In the corresponding compensation for land acquisition, the compensation for each land acquisition is given a specific indicator of non-agricultural conversion. Currently, more than 4400 peasants in Dongbang town have been converted into civil registration.

Third, the local authorities have improved resettlement work following property demolition. Dongbang Town authorities increase investment in the construction of resettlement communities for land-lost peasants. On the one hand, they have established a financing platform to raise funds, set up a new rural construction investment company with a board of directors and a board of supervisors, and cooperate with relevant banks for financial support. With a total investment of 1 billion yuan, the building area covers 350,000 square meters, having the capacity of holding 1058 resettlement households. Up to now, 510 households have been placed in the new buildings.

On the other hand, the authorities have raised assets, mortgage loans, and traded the collective land in the market to raise construction funds. After the renovation, the living conditions of these peasants in all villages have reached the standard of urban residential areas. The unified property management is implemented within the community. Public facilities are allocated according to the standards of residential communities. Public infrastructure, such as roads, water supply, sewage, power supply, communication and gas supply, is integrated with the city.

Fourth, the authorities have developed the collective economy and solved the employment of land-lost peasants. The key to solving the employment problem for land-lost peasants lies in how to develop the local economy and form a trend of balanced development of primary, secondary, and tertiary industries, and create more employment demands. In addition to monetary compensation, the authorities in Dongbang use the method of returning the land as a supplementary means, in which after the state collect the cultivated land, the government would return part of the land to the locals to develop the collective economy according to a certain proportion. That is one way of solving the employment problem of land-lost peasants by developing a collective economy.

Fifth, it has increased the promotion of social employment and security. The employment issues have been promoted, and large-scale special job fairs are held twice. The authorities have helped 388 urban and rural residents with employment difficulties find new jobs and developed 48 public welfare jobs. The government has actively provided social assistance, living allowances and temporary price subsidies of 1.6316 million yuan to 24 "five guarantee households", 105 low-income families, and 66 low-income families, and provided 377,700 yuan of charity and medical funds to 22 people who met the conditions for serious illness medical assistance. The authority will keep working on promoting the construction of the aged care service system. The daycare center of the Qigan village has met the requirements at the provincial level 3A and distributed 1,774,900 yuan of pension in one year. Meanwhile, one-on-one assistance has been provided to people who are orphaned, widowed, weak, or disabled.

## *5.2. The Main Effect of Land-Lost Peasants' Citizenization after Reform*

### *5.2.1. Housing Resettlement and Social Security for Land-Lost Peasants*

After the original collective land was requisitioned, the land-lost peasants in Dongbang Town have been properly relocated and begun their new life in the resettlement community for land-lost peasants, where they can enjoy the adequate infrastructure and living conditions. According to the

survey, 23% are “very satisfied” with the new living environment, 51% “satisfactory”, 15% “normal”, 8% “less satisfied”, and only 3% “clearly not satisfied”.

The survey of peasants’ subjective evaluation shows that 13% of the land-lost peasants have significantly improved their living conditions, 33% improved, 25% not changed, 23% declined, and 6% declined significantly.

By the end of 2017, the social insurance coverage rate, guaranteed rate, and contribution rate have reached 95.5%, 99.98%, and 96.74%, respectively. The medical security in towns and villages has been improved continuously. The number of participants has increased to 24,358 in the whole year, with a participation rate of 99.96%, and the coverage rate of the poverty-stricken population is 100%, ranking among the best in the city.

In terms of the overall economic situation, compared with the situation before the land requisition, the income of the land-lost peasants has increased, but the proportion of various income components in the total income has changed diversely. The most significant changes are the agricultural and rental income. The former has declined from 41% to 12%, and the latter, from zero to 11% of the national income. The proportion of other income components has not changed much. The survey shows that, after the land requisition, the annual income of peasants below 3000 yuan decreased by 12.6%, those between 3000 yuan and 10,000 yuan decreased by 13%, while those between 10,000 yuan and 50,000 yuan increased by 23.5%, and those above 50,000 yuan by 2.1%. These statistics indicate despite that there are cases of living standard declining, overall, the income of landless peasants has increased, and the proportion of people with lower incomes has decreased. In addition, the income structure of landless peasants has also undergone huge changes, especially in terms of the significant decrease in the proportion of agricultural income and the increase of the rental income.

### 5.2.2. Employment of Urbanized Land-Lost Peasants

According to the survey, the employment distribution of peasants before the land requisition is as follows: 543 peasants, accounting for 61% of the total number of those surveyed; 254 workers, 28%; 52 wage earners, 6%; 48 people unspecified, 5%. Comparatively, the employment data of peasants after the land requisition is 7% of peasants, 57% of workers, 4% of wage earners, 11% of others, and 19% of those with no specified occupation. The contrast shows that the number of peasants who continue to work as peasants after land acquisition has decreased by 54%, among whom 29% have turned to private enterprises and engaged in industries and service sectors; 11% in individual business, temporary work, and other work; 19% unemployed and living off their expropriation payments, which has posed huge social pressure.

In terms of employment stability, the figures are not so satisfying. Among those employed, 47% have worked for more than one year in the same job, 29% in two jobs, and 24% in three or more jobs. For those who quit their jobs, 44% did so because the job was too challenging, and the payment was poor; 21% were due to the discrepancy between the position requirements and their capabilities; 15% retired from illness or old age; 11% resigned for lack of career growth; 3% started their own business; 6% left their job for other reasons. It shows that the employment prospects of land-lost peasants are not promising. As a result of previous working experience in farming, low level of education, and lack of professional skills, peasants can only be engaged in labor-intensive work with unsatisfying payment. Moreover, they have to compete with a large number of cheap laborers, which result in much pressure.

### 5.2.3. The Political and Social Participation Consciousness of Land-Lost Peasants

The political life of urban residents is different in China and the West. In western society, political organization is regarded as a democratic representative system, where people express their political opinions mainly through elections, rallies, protests, and participation. The Chinese political system is characterized by top-down “pressure”. Although urban residents cannot elect local chief executives, they can elect representatives of neighborhood committees and deputies to the National People’s



Congress. Letters and visits, local government telephone hotlines, suggestions, and participation in community activities are other ways to express various appeals. The political participation of land-lost peasants is mainly analyzed from two aspects. The first is the enthusiasm of the land-lost peasants. In the survey, “Do you care about or participate in collective democratic elections, supervision, management, and decision-making activities?”, “very concerned or want to participate” makes up about 21% of the total number of people surveyed, “more concerned or want to participate” 47%, and “not too concerned or do not want to participate” 32%. There are still some land-lost peasants who are reluctant to participate in political life and are unwilling to care about corporate affairs. The second is about ways that peasants can get involved in politics. To answer the question “How will you complain when you are dissatisfied with the work of the party or the government”, 67% of the respondents have chosen “Report to the community officials”, 12% “Dialing the government complaint hotline”, 8% “Report by letters and visits”, 13% “Don’t care and will not report”. In general, the land-lost peasants have a wide range of ways to report problems to their superiors, and the pathways are quite smooth. However, the most critical way of complaints is to report to the community officials, and other channels are seldom chosen. Only 12% of the respondents have opted for the choice of “do not care”. A relatively small number of respondents chose not to report.

The social participation of land-lost peasants can also be analyzed from two aspects. First of all, most of them are willing to join civil society organizations, including cultural organizations, environmental protection teams, and public security patrol groups. According to the collected data, 69% of the respondents would like to join these organizations. As to the question “Are you willing to join civil society organizations in the community like Art and Sports Groups?” 64% of the respondents chose yes, 23% no and 13% ticked “It does not matter.” Secondly, as for the question “Are you willing to be part of voluntary organizations or voluntary community services,” 11% of respondents chose “I would love to, and have participated quite often”, 29% “I would participate and have done so when free.” 41% “Not every interested, and have participated occasionally”, and 19 percent “Not at all.” It can be seen that around 81% of these peasants expressed their willingness to serve others, and they have also displayed an increasing awareness to serve the civilians and the community.

#### 5.2.4. Life Satisfaction and Urban-Citizen Identity of Land-Lost Peasants

The citizenization of land-lost peasants is not only reflected in material conditions and social life but also their spiritual identification with citizenship. The survey reveals that land-lost peasants have shown specific characteristics of citizenization, although their citizenization still has a long way to go. In answering the question of “Do you want to have an urban Hukou and become an urban resident”, 31% of the respondents ticked yes, 59% no, and another 10% “Not interested”. The main reason for the low enthusiasm of land-lost peasants for urban household registration is that they think that peasants could rely on their village community. However, once they become urban residents, they have to depend on themselves for everything. Accordingly, they could be quite helpless in their lives. About the question of “Are you satisfied with the city’s work and lifestyle,” 9% and 17% of them chose “Very satisfied” and “Relatively satisfied,” 27% “Not really, little has changed”, 39% chose “Not very satisfied”, and 8% “Not satisfied at all”. It is clear that roughly 47% of the land-lost peasants are not happy with their current work and lifestyle, which mainly because they are dissatisfied or unaccustomed to the more restrictive lifestyle in the city and the fast work pace. From the perspective of peasants’ awareness of citizenship, while responding to the question of “What is your current identity?”, only 32% of the people surveyed chose “I am an urban resident now”, while 57% believe they are still peasants. Even though a peasant has lost land and is now living in an apartment building, he or she is still a peasant since the household registration remains the same. Those who have registered as permanent residents in the city feel that as long as the collective assets of their original village have not been disposed of and the village is there, they are still peasants. 11% of the respondents think they are “half citizens and half peasants”. Although they are now living in the city, there is a big gap

between them and other residents in terms of personal manners, educational level, employment, and so on. Therefore, they do not think they are urban-citizens in full sense.

Furthermore, to respond to the question about a relationship with neighbors, only 8% of the respondents opted for “As close as a family”, 21% “Good, interacting a lot”, and 71% “Not very close, only greet each other occasionally”. As for the question about their adaptation to community life, only 45% chose “Getting better,” 21% “Nothing changed,” and 34% “Getting worse”. These results show that the transformation of villagers into urban citizens is not only a simple variation in living conditions, but also involves changes in lifestyle, living habits, and interpersonal relationships. Many land-lost peasants feel that the relationship with their neighbors in the apartment’s buildings is not as harmonious as before. It takes a long time for them to fit in the new community life in reality.

From the above data analysis, it is seen that land-lost peasants in Dongbang Town have resulted from the urbanization policy of Dongbang Town government. They are generally in a passive position with no choice in the land expropriation process. Due to losing the land, they can no longer maintain farms’ lifestyle, but instead, need to adapt to city life. With active efforts from the local government, most landless peasants have received better economic compensation, their living standards being improved generally. They can also enjoy the same rights as urban residents, including medical treatment, unemployment benefits, education, and other public services. However, the adaptation to the urban lifestyle for land-lost peasants is not very successful. They face fierce competition in the job market, and some are unemployed due to the lack of adequate quality and skills. Meanwhile, the vast majority of land-lost peasants do not realize their self-identity as citizens but still as peasants.

## 6. Discussion

In the process of modernization, the sustainable development of cities requires the coordination of economy, society, environment, and governance capabilities of the government. If there are problems in one aspect or several aspects, they will hinder the smooth progress of urbanization, turn the city into a source of chaos and disorder, and fail to provide a quality life for its urban-citizens. In the process of urbanization in China, the emergence of land-lost peasants is “passive,” which indicates that land-lost peasants are not voluntary in moving their life from rural to urban areas. Instead, they have been forced to do so because of the state’s land acquisition and policy requirements. This paper has investigated the process of citizenization of land-lost peasants in Dongbang Town, Changshu City, China, and yielded the following implications.

### 6.1. *The Good Governance Capacity of the Local Government is of Crucial Significance for the Sustainability of the Land-Lost Peasants’ Citizenization*

China’s urbanization process has many differences from those of Western countries. One of the essential features is that “the role of the local state in regional and urban development is more than merely being a facilitator that provides institutional support; the local state is also a significant player and stakeholder that is directly involved in local economic growth and urban construction” [28]. Some studies have found that the governance capacity of urban policymakers plays a crucial role in the development of the locality [29]. “Governance is a core issue within debates about sustainability, partly because existing arrangements are responsible for the problem and partly because creating new ways to do things together is a part of the solution” [30].

In some parts of China, due to the lack of urban governance capacity, the phenomenon of “ghost cities” has emerged [31]. These studies indicate that Dongbang Town of Changshu City has displayed good policy-making and governance capabilities. In order to ensure the smooth and sustainable process of the urbanization for land-lost peasants, the local government has formulated a reasonable guarantee policy, and the entire application process of the public policies is open and fair and has won the trust of peasants.

Specifically, in the process of land acquisition, there is no conflict between the government and the peasants involved. The whole process of land acquisition is quite smooth. After moving into the newly

built urban community, most peasants have shown more satisfaction. Dongbang Town government provides better housing for them, and the distribution criteria are open and fair. According to the relevant laws of the state, appropriate economic compensation standards have been formulated for land-lost peasants, so that the interests of land-lost peasants would not be harmed. The government provides education, medical care, water, electricity, gas, social security, and other aspects of housing for the land-lost peasants who are transformed into urban citizens. In promoting employment, the government has provided various training opportunities to enhance the employability of new urban citizens. In terms of a political and social life, the local authority has offered various channels for political participation, reporting complaints, and participation in civil society organizations, as well as special assistance to land-lost peasants who are experiencing living difficulties. The survey shows that 69% of the landless peasants who have undergone job training have jobs, 18% of them are unemployed, and 13% unspecified. Of all the training activities, 41% are sponsored by the government, 21% by land acquisition and resettlement agencies, where both parties have played an important role in promoting and guiding the employment of landless peasants.

However, it needs to be aware that the excellent governance capacity of Dongbang Town is based on the relatively developed economic conditions in the area. From 2017 to 2018, the Changshu Municipal Government ranked fourth in China's top 100 counties, which makes the government financially more able to provide better material compensation and social security for land-lost peasants. The well-developed economy has also fostered active private economy here, which in turn provides relatively more job opportunities for land-lost peasants as well as income for rental housing. By contrast, the compensation of some underdeveloped areas in China is much lower, which makes the life of many land-lost peasants more vulnerable.

#### *6.2. The "Passive" Citizenization Process Requires More Sustainable Governance*

From the perspective of the citizenization process of the land-lost peasants in Dongbang Town, the external conditions, such as compensation for property demolition, housing conditions and the acquisition of citizen's rights can be achieved in a short period through the efforts of the government. However, the improvement of the intrinsic characteristics of individuals, like the improvement of employment quality and citizenship identity, is a long-term process. Thus, citizenization cannot be achieved by the improvement of external material conditions and rights alone. It also requires peasants to complete the transformation to meet the needs of urban life. This study suggests that these peasants' low educational level, lack of professional skills and less access to employment information are the main factors that have deprived them of job opportunities and put them in a vulnerable position in the market competition. Lack of initiative to seek employment is another reason that this group of people find it quite hard to adapt to urban life. The survey shows that only 36% of the respondents are actively seeking jobs, while 64% are not. Among those active job hunters, only 57% have succeeded in landing a job, and 43% failed to do so. The employment problem of the land-lost peasants cannot be solved within one day. In addition to actively expanding employment channels for them, the government should also do long-term work in many aspects.

Due to the employment challenges and lack of identification as urban residents themselves, the urbanization of those peasants, who lost their land because of compulsory land acquisition, is in need of sustainable governance from the government. The latter can adopt various measures to protect peasant's legitimate rights and interests in the demolition process, and improve external conditions to help them develop their identification as urban residents. It will take a long time for these land-lost peasants to identify with the economic, political and social life in the city, as well as themselves. This requires local governments to keep working after urbanization to increase the adaptability of new citizens to urban life and prevent them from falling into the trap of urbanization.

### *6.3. The Sustainable Development of the City Needs the Compatibility of “Compulsory” and “Spontaneous” Urbanization*

From the perspective of typology, the concept of urbanization can be categorized into “compulsory” urbanization guided by government and “spontaneous” urbanization based on market economic development. The former refers to the government’s strong position in the relationship between the state and society. The government can rely on the information it has on land and laws to expropriate land from peasants to expand the city. The latter is generally based on the private ownership of land, which promotes the transfer of rural population to cities through the natural forces brought about by economic development of the city.

In comparison, the “compulsory” urbanization can give full play to the initiative of local governments, promote the process of urbanization in a short period, and rationally integrate various production factors and resources according to scientific planning. However, this kind of urbanization is also easy to stray off the course of economic and social development and commit mistakes in excessive “constructivism” policy thinking. The “spontaneous” urbanization is more respectful of social forces, and the process of integrating peasants into the city is natural. However, this model also has disadvantages in that its process of urbanization is slow, and it is difficult to come up with a rational and comprehensive plan for new cities.

Recently in China, the urbanization process in some places has experienced excessive advancement and has deviated from the course of local economic and social development. China’s current official management system requires local government officials to be responsible for higher-level governments and to conduct annual performance evaluations, which has prompted local officials to develop excessively and ahead of time in pursuit of political achievements, especially for short-term performance, regardless of the actual needs from the society. In reality, land-expropriated peasants, in some places, lost the land they depended on, and they could not find equal employment opportunities. The government also lacks necessary financial capacity to provide adequate help for land-lost peasants, which has led to the phenomenon that “the urbanization of land is faster than the urbanization of the population” in some parts of China [2]. Some studies show that “under the pressure of financial distress, as well as the requirements of economic growth and urbanization, local governments in China are bound with fiscal revenue from land development and land urbanization and have formed a pro-growth alliance with enterprises, property developers” [32].

Therefore, a good urbanization process needs to maintain an appropriate balance between the “compulsion” of the government and the “spontaneity” of social forces, which will not only accelerate urbanization, promoting the rapid development of society, but also enable landless peasants to integrate into urban life and achieve sustainable urban development. Inland acquisition and property demolition, Dongbang Town of Changshu City has relied on the more developed market economy and carried out scientific planning and management according to the real situation, thus achieving a better urbanization effect in general.

### *6.4. The Urbanization Idea Needs to Be Transformed from “Economic-Oriented” to “People-Oriented”*

The traditional society dominated by the agricultural economy was a society with unequal individual rights. Before the policy of Reform and Opening-up in China, under the constraints of various systems such as the household system and the urban-rural distribution system, there was a dual structural imbalance between urban and rural areas. Compared with urban-citizens, peasants were in an unequal state in various sectors such as public services, employment, medical care, education, social security, and housing [33]. Modernization requires the universality and equality of national rights, urging all social groups to be treated with equality. Unfortunately, in the process of urbanization in the early days of China’s Reform and Opening-up, the Chinese government’s national policy centered on industrial development has further strengthened the unequal rights between peasants and urban-citizens. Some peasants’ land has been expropriated by the government at low prices, thus losing the guarantee for their survival and sharing the fruits of urbanization. They have not been

successfully converted into new urban-citizens and become marginal groups between isolated villages and cities, which has harmed the construction of good social order.

In this context, the process of urbanization is not only embodied in the “spatial urbanization,” but also in the “institutional urbanization” [34]. This requires the establishment of a new order of freedom, equality, and harmony through the reconstruction of social systems. The Chinese government has also recognized this in its development and has put forward the concept of “new urbanization.” In other words, urbanization must shift from being economy-oriented to people-oriented instead. Specifically, the new urbanization requires the transformation from a model that features high energy consumption and high pollution, the blind pursuit of economic development speed and the land urbanization, to the concept of emphasizing human development and promoting the sustainable development of harmonious social development.

## 7. Conclusions

This study focuses on the sustainable development of land-lost peasants in the process of urbanization. Modernization is also reflected in the process of urbanization, and the rural population has to be moved to the cities in large numbers. This kind of population migration can be carried out in a variety of ways, including education, career transformation, and the natural migration of the population. In addition, the conversion of land properties from agricultural use to urban land is also one of the essential ways to promote population migration. This paper takes the citizenization of peasants, who lost their land as a result of land acquisition by the government in Dongbang Town, Changshu City, Jiangsu Province, China, as a case study to explore the effectiveness and problems experienced by these peasants’ in their conversion to their new identity as urban residents with help from the local government. Our research found that the landless peasants in Dongbang Town completed the transition to citizenship in a relatively short period with comprehensive policy support from the local government. This case reminds us that the proper political and governance capabilities of the local government is of crucial importance to the completion of the urbanization for landless peasants. However, the transformation of the peasant lifestyle into that of an urban citizen requires a long period. In order to ensure the sustainable development of their lives, the local government must continue adopting policy measures to help them further adapt to urban life, and develop their identity as an urban citizen by providing them with material security and proper housing. Furthermore, the local government needs to maintain a balance between “compulsion” and “spontaneity” in the process of urbanization, and shift the focus of urbanization from “economic-oriented” to “people-oriented.”

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