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Rural Land Consolidation and Social Consciousness Change: A Case Study of a Land Consolidation Program in Rural Chongqing, China

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Abstract: With the changing relationship between urban and rural areas in China, the rural areas are experiencing rapid social transformation. To ensure successful implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, land consolidation has become a major measure of rural economic reform. Existing research focuses on quantitative studies exploring the relationship between land consolidation and rural economic development, but there is a lack of studies on the relationship between land consolidation and social change. In this study, we utilized Rocha's conceptual framework for community empowerment and selected Jin'an Village as our study area, using semi-structured interviews and semi-participatory observation to obtain original materials, with the aim of providing a detailed description of the specific practice of land consolidation and analyzing the impact of land consolidation on the transformation of rural social consciousness. The study found that the participatory practices of Chinese rural villagers in the land consolidation process are consistent with the development process of community empowerment. Rural land consolidation involves villagers in the land consolidation process, which can effectively stimulate villagers' participation in public affairs. Concurrently, the interaction between villagers and outside investors disrupts the conventional socialization model in rural areas and motivates villagers to act in accordance with contractual agreements. The conclusion is that land consolidation in rural areas can enhance the political democracy and legal consciousness of local villagers, which can lead to a change in local social consciousness. Our findings also emphasize the crucial necessity of providing rural villagers with improved accessibility to professional services and information, coupled with the continued promotion of land consolidation to advance modernization in these areas.

Keywords: land consolidation; social consciousness; modernization; rural development; rural China



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1. Introduction

The rural revitalization strategy is a long-term national policy presented by the Communist Party of China. Because of China's persistent urban–rural divide, which revolves around the “price scissors” method of operation [1], rural areas in China are socially and economically less developed than their urban counterparts. As China's reforms and opening began to ease restrictions on population mobility, higher-paying jobs and improved urban living standards attracted rural residents to cities [2]. With the depopulation of rural areas in China, the issues of labor loss, arable land abandonment, and the increasing number of people left behind in the countryside have become increasingly severe, resulting in the problem of “hollowing out” in these areas. According to Guo, rural hollowing, which is described as “outward expansion with inside hollowing”, is a phenomenon that is harmful to sustainable rural development in the process of urbanization and industrialization [3]. The hollowing out of China's rural areas, while not a uniquely Chinese phenomenon [4], is largely a historical product of state policy influences. Now, China's

“Rural Revitalization Strategy” indicates a move away from past policies, which favored urban development, to a rurally biased policy, which gives priority to agricultural and rural development [5]. Since policies no longer hinder rural development, the challenges faced by rural areas regarding economic development have become the center of scholarly discourse on rural decline. Incomes earned by farmers through traditional agriculture are considerably lower than those earned through non-agricultural work in urban areas. Some studies indicate that the larger the proportion of non-agricultural industries, the higher the corresponding degree of non-agriculturalization and urbanization of farmers, and the higher the degree of rural hollowing [6]. These findings suggest that traditional agriculture outputs can no longer satisfy the needs of the rural population to achieve their own development. Since rural areas primarily derive income from land, the issue of rural hollowing-out is essentially a problem of rural land use, which Ma refers to as “the long-term imbalance between the functional supply of rural land use and the functional demand for rural development” [7]. Consequently, to achieve rural revitalization through economic development, it is imperative to prioritize the use of rural land.

Due to the influence of China’s early land policies, “land fragmentation” is a prevalent form of land use in rural areas. Land fragmentation is a condition where a farm is made up of many undersized land plots that are usually randomly scattered in the land space [8]. The fragmentation of land in the countryside reduces the efficiency of land use and thus adversely affects the outcome of agricultural production [8–10]. Land consolidation is a policy tool aimed at mitigating land fragmentation [11]. Its basic form is to amalgamate land parcels through engineering measurements and integrate fragmented land holdings by readjusting land ownership [12]. Land consolidation concentrates dispersed labor, capital, and other resources, ultimately leading to an increase in land concentration and facilitating large-scale agricultural production [13,14]. This process not only reduces the economic costs of land fragmentation but also frees up scattered labor from agriculture, creating opportunities for new industries to flourish [15,16]. In the early 20th century, several European countries, such as France and the Netherlands, initiated land consolidation projects, and by the 1980s, they had successfully developed mature land consolidation models [17,18]. There are two approaches to performing land consolidation: the top-down approach and the bottom-up approach [19]. China has typically utilized a top-down approach featuring state-led land consolidation with an emphasis on policy development and spatial management [20–22]. China began implementing land annexation projects in the mid-1990s with the aim of ensuring national food security and stabilizing farmland patterns [23,24]. As the primary food-producing region, China designated the countryside as the hub of land consolidation initiatives. In practice, rural land consolidation projects are usually carried out based on the village as the smallest unit, as the village is the basic social–economic unit and the cell of the rural territorial system in China [25,26]. Despite a delayed start, China is now conducting multiple experiments focused on land consolidation in rural areas [27]. Land consolidation typically involves the participation of companies, village collectives, and villagers. Among them, the company and the villagers are direct stakeholders as rural land consolidation centralizes land use rights previously scattered among villagers into the company’s hands [25]. The exchange of rights for land use necessitates fees paid to villagers; therefore, through land consolidation, villagers may earn revenue beyond their agricultural output and, in turn, augment their overall income. Emphasizing the “reorganization of rural resources” [28], land consolidation starts with land concentration and extends to every facet of rural economic development [29], living standards [30,31], and environmental well-being [32,33]. In summary, land consolidation in China represents a significantly more extensive endeavor compared to other regions with the purpose of creating a sustainable system of rural spatial governance [34–36].

Land consolidation in rural parts of China has clear benefits. The existing research indicates that land consolidation in rural China can increase the area of arable land, expand the scale of agricultural production [37], and enhance the quality of rural living conditions [38]. This enables a more integrated and mutually beneficial cooperative development model be-

tween rural and urban areas and ultimately activates the endogenous driving forces of rural population, land, and industry [39]. Existing research confirms that reforming the land system in rural China, with land consolidation as its core [28,40], is a crucial prerequisite for the revitalization of rural areas. Scholars have categorized the fundamental types [29,41], features [25], and action logic of land consolidation [42–44], which provides an academic foundation for the further development of land consolidation in China. However, there is also literature that expresses concerns about land consolidation. On one hand, land consolidation has resulted in enterprises taking over production on the land, which has, to some extent, undermined the rights and interests of farmers in the land. If enterprises do not hire farmers for agricultural work, those who lack other sources of income will be unable to support themselves due to their loss of land [45]. On the other hand, the unequal status of the investor and the farmer is apparent: when a plentiful harvest occurs, the investor is only required to pay the farmer an agreed-upon amount of money; however, if market fluctuations result in minimal or no profits from produce sales, investors may choose to dishonor contracts, significantly impacting farmers' losses [46]. In brief, China's rural revitalization strategy should encompass various domains, including economics, politics, culture, and societal progress [42], while current discussions on land consolidation primarily prioritize economic development and environmental conservation [38,47–49], often overlooking the changes in rural social consciousness. It is worth noting that although land consolidation in China is a top-down approach, it also includes bottom-up participatory measures [50], which is reflected in the participation of villagers in land consolidation projects [33,45]. The existing literature often portrays farmers as unimportant contributors to land consolidation projects and omits them from the decision-making process of land consolidation [51,52]. However, villagers were adept at leveraging their personal qualities during the land consolidation process; through their interactions with local elites, they vocalized their desire for consultation [53]. The villagers' concern for collective assets and personal livelihoods shows the importance they attach to their rights [27]. These behaviors can be attributed to the villagers' call for democracy and adherence to the rule of law. They can have a significant impact on the land consolidation process and its ultimate outcome [54,55]. The focus on villagers suggests a research progression; as Liu suggests, rural revitalization is not a simple economic issue but instead should go beyond the scope of industrial development and the economy and pay more heed to cultural trend dimensions [56]. If social culture is defined as the political and legal awareness of people, then land consolidation as an economic policy instrument is connected to democracy and the rule of law in rural areas. Firstly, land consolidation enables capital allocation by attracting investors to rural China, prompting farmers to move away from traditional agricultural practices and establishing a more intricate social division of labor. In this process, investors and community members must engage in effective communication to acquire cross-sector knowledge necessary for making informed decisions [57]. This circumstance has created room for consultation and negotiation while also contributing to political democratization. Second, agreement-based land consolidation, which rests on mature market transaction rules, established property rights security, and contractual integrity mechanisms, fosters greater legal consciousness among participants [58,59]. Although scholars have noted the potential impact of land consolidation on democracy and legal awareness in Chinese rural society, these discussions have been scattered across various topics, lacking specialized perspectives and holistic discussions, which has led to a gap in the current literature.

This paper analyzes changes in the participatory behaviors and attitudes of Chinese villagers during the land consolidation process and evaluates the effects of land consolidation on the consciousness of villagers. By examining typical cases in rural areas, this paper shows that when disputes arise between villagers and investors, traditional rural elites have lost the ability to resolve disputes, and villagers are taking the initiative to have disputes adjudicated according to the law. The paper discusses democratization and the rule of law in rural areas, exposing their ongoing modernization process and filling the gap

in the research on the impact of land consolidation on rural society's development. The paper is organized as follows:

Section 1 is the introduction. First, with the theme of rural revitalization, it reviews the reason for the hollowing out of China's countryside and emphasizes that China's rural revitalization needs to start with the reform of the land system. Second, the relevance of rural revitalization and land consolidation is introduced. Finally, it identifies research gaps in the existing literature and puts forward research propositions. Section 2 is the analytical framework. The relationship between economic development and democratic politics and the rule of law is briefly described, and an analytical framework for land consolidation to promote the democratization of rural politics and the legal consciousness is constructed. Section 3 is the research methodology, which describes in detail the study area, the research methodology, the specific implementation process and the data sources. Section 4, Results, describes the political and legal challenges that land consolidation has brought to rural China. The discussion is presented in Section 5. Section 6 is the final section, with conclusions and several specific policy recommendations made based on the findings.

2. Analytical Framework

Land consolidation, as a tool for revitalizing rural areas, aims to enhance the economic development capability of rural areas, ultimately leading to economic empowerment for rural communities. Therefore, for the purpose of better understanding the impact of rural land consolidation on changes in rural social consciousness, this study can employ theories related to community empowerment as an analytical framework. In the beginning stages of researching community empowerment, empowerment was a widely used term for the experience of power: the power of being changed, the power to change oneself, the power to have an impact on others, or the power gained from serving/influencing others [60,61]. Today, scholars prefer to think of community empowerment as a process: the potential of people to progress from individual to collective action along a dynamic continuum [62]. We employ Rocha's (1997) conceptual framework to comprehend community empowerment processes [63]. Her typology of "the ladder of empowerment" aids in creating a categorization of the development procedures of villagers' actions [63], which leads to better explanations for the changes in rural community perception that have arisen due to land consolidation progress.

Rocha distinguishes between five types of empowerment: atomistic individual, embedded individual, mediated, socio-political, and political. Each type possesses unique characteristics and is distinct from the others. It is worth noting that the typology of empowerment serves as a descriptive tool and not an evaluative one, detailing the move "from individual to community empowerment" [63]. We observe community empowerment triggered by land transfer in rural China, with a focus on the development from "embedded individual" empowerment to "socio-political" empowerment in rural communities. Embedded individual empowerment considers the embeddedness of the individual in larger structures or settings, which conceptualizes individuals as embedded within the larger context affecting their circumstances [64]. Embedded individual empowerment is usually manifested through participation in specific types of organizations and influencing decision-making within them. Socio-political empowerment, also referred to as "transformative populism", is a cooperative process aimed at effecting change within a community's sphere with regard to collaborative efforts to modify social, political, or economic relationships [63]. Community socio-political empowerment prioritizes the individuals who compose the community. Then, driven by the aspiration to enhance the community's material well-being, individuals collaborate in grassroots political activism to empower the community and transform the community from an object that is acted upon by outside forces to a subject capable of acting upon and transforming its surroundings [65]. Socio-political empowerment entails two fundamental components: community members' critical reflection and collective action against existing power structure relationships. Thus,

it can be said that under the socio-political empowerment type, community members undergo a process that enables them to transition from passive onlookers to active agents. This process is developmental in nature [66].

The participatory practices utilized by rural Chinese villagers during the land consolidation process align with the typological definition of community empowerment. Rural China is a community where villagers live together within a demarcated geographic area [67]. The natural and social environment of the village forms the living space of the villagers and may influence their behavior [64]. Villagers have the ability to express their opinions and coordinate efforts within their communities to affect positive change on issues that directly impact them. In this context, rural communities can be viewed as “open spaces” appropriate for fostering community empowerment [68]. Figure 1 displays the process of land consolidation, which focuses on centralizing fragmented land into a single block of land. Categorized based on the relationship between participants, the main elements of the first phase can be roughly divided into two parts. In internal relations, the participants are the villagers who own the land. They engage in negotiations to reach a consensus on an external course of action through voting. In addition, the villagers usually designate village representatives, who are typically village cadres, to act as agents of their collective will and represent them in external affairs. In the external relationship, the participants are mainly the investor and the villagers. The investor engages in negotiations with the villagers in order to centralize the land. Negotiations cover the fundamental aspects of the land, the methodology employed by the investor in centralizing the land, the approach and quantity of the villagers’ income, and the final outcome of the negotiations is rendered in a contract signed by both the investor and the villagers. The first phase of land consolidation aligns with the features of embedded individual community empowerment: under favorable policies, villagers initiate participation in the land consolidation project, led by the Village Committee, to augment their economic development capabilities and assist with successful land transfer [63,69].

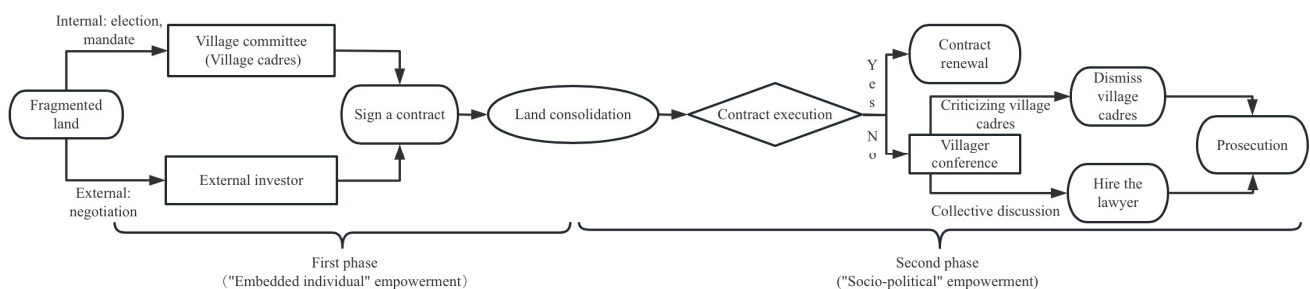


Figure 1. The process of land consolidation in rural China.

After centralizing fragmented land, the second phase of land consolidation is initiated, which involves the production of land and the distribution of its benefits. The investor’s production activities on the centralized land usually change the land’s original crops and boundaries, and sometimes even the land’s use. For the villagers, the primary concern is whether they will receive the contractual benefits from consolidating the land. If the investor fulfills the contract as promised, there are no issues. However, if the investor defaults, the villagers must decide whether to let the investor find someone else to continue the contract or to cancel the contract and pursue legal action against the defaulting investor. The second phase of land consolidation demonstrates that rural communities have progressed into a phase of socio-political empowerment. As rural villagers are generally perceived as being on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy, they are more likely to perceive external threats [70], which gives rise to the idea of changing established power relations and motivates them to engage in struggle. When the villagers discovered their interests were compromised, they took the opportunity to decide the outcome of the land transfer. This aligns with Kieffer’s perspective on socio-political empowerment [66]. In conclusion, land consolidation as an economic factor in rural community empowerment will be interlinked

with other factors of community empowerment, including a sense of democracy and the rule of law [71,72].

Consistent with the progress of land consolidation, the analysis logic of this paper is also divided into two parts. In the first phase of the transformation from “fragmented land” to “concentrated land”, villagers discussed the transfer of land use rights in the form of a villager conference, reflecting the element of equality in democratic politics. Furthermore, the villagers participate in selecting their representatives by voting, further enhancing the impression of political democratization. When negotiating with external investors, the villagers requested that the negotiation outcomes be established by a contract, demonstrating their confidence in the property rights protection system under the legal framework and showcasing the awakening of Jin’an villagers’ legal consciousness. In the second phase, it focuses on the fact that after the investor was unable to fulfill the contract, the villagers chose to go to court as the ultimate means of resolving the dispute. This implies that as long as villagers are involved in the land consolidation process, they are able to increase their legal consciousness, irrespective of the success of the land consolidation outcomes. In addition, the critique from villagers toward village cadres indicates that traditional authority, represented by the “rural elite”, has been degraded to an ordinary member of the rural community because of their inability to solve the problems arising from the land consolidation process. This situation has also contributed to the democratization of rural politics in China.

3. Empirical Case Analysis

3.1. Case Study Area Overview

In 2014, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council issued the Opinions on Guiding the Orderly Transfer of Rural Land Management Rights and Developing Adequate Scale Operations in Agriculture. The reform of the transfer of rural land management rights emphasized three key elements: (1) The ownership rights, the contracted management rights, and the management rights of rural land are three distinct types of rights, and an investor can only obtain the management rights of the land. (2) Encourage local communities to develop innovative methods for transferring land management rights in order to consolidate fragmented land into contiguous parcels. (3) Support and guide farmers to transfer their land management rights on a long-term basis and facilitate the transfer of farmers’ labor from agriculture to other industries. It can be seen that allowing farmers to transfer their land management rights is the predominant method of implementing large-scale land consolidation in China.

Chongqing is the direct-administered municipality with the largest area of rural land in China. As one of the initial pilot areas for land consolidation, Chongqing has made numerous attempts at consolidating land, including cooperative management, sharing of management rights, and leasing of management rights. In 2017, the Yubei government of Chongqing issued a Circular on Further Regulating the Transfer of Rural Land Contracted Management Rights to reinforce its support for land consolidation projects in Chongqing. In China, public administration takes place at six levels: nation, province, city, county, town, and village [45]. Dawan Town, located in Yubei District, Chongqing, serves as a pilot area for land consolidation in China.

Following the preceding discussion, we have selected the land consolidation case in Jin’an Village of Dawan Town for our study due to its unique characteristics that attracted our attention. Firstly, the village is not a typical remote rural area as it is located only 40 km away from the city. The easy and efficient transportation link between the village and the city helps minimize storage and transportation expenses, which entices external investors to establish businesses in the village. Secondly, since the Chongqing government does not allow non-agricultural construction on agricultural land, the land consolidation in Jin’an Village has been carried out with the aim of expanding the scale of agricultural production. When discussing land consolidation in Jin’an Village, it is feasible to avoid confusion with land consolidation aimed at developing the tourism and real estate industries. Thirdly,

during the implementation of land consolidation in this village, the investors removed the original land boundaries, resulting in fragmented land that was not only legally but also physically connected. Consequently, the difficulty of determining the exact location of land rights makes it challenging for farmers to recover their land boundaries. This situation has rarely been mentioned in previous literature.

Dawan Town is situated in the northern part of Yubei District, Chongqing. The land usage consists of fifty percent mountainous terrain, forty percent arable lands, three percent water bodies, and seven percent transportation and residential lands. Jin'an Village is situated in a mountainous area that forms part of Dawan Township in the northeastern area of Yubei District and is approximately 50 km away from the center of Yubei District (as shown in Figure 2). The arable land area of Dawan Township is among the highest in Yubei District, and it is the main agricultural production site in Yubei District. Jin'an Village, like other villages in Dawan Township, specializes in traditional grain cultivation, with oilseed rape as the main cash crop. The objective of Dawan Township's development strategy is to draw in external investors and boost tourism by focusing on the advancement of local specialty agriculture. Jin'an Village is located next to a highway leading to the central city, and based on these advantaged endowments of resources, it became one of the first villages in Chongqing to undergo large-scale land consolidation.

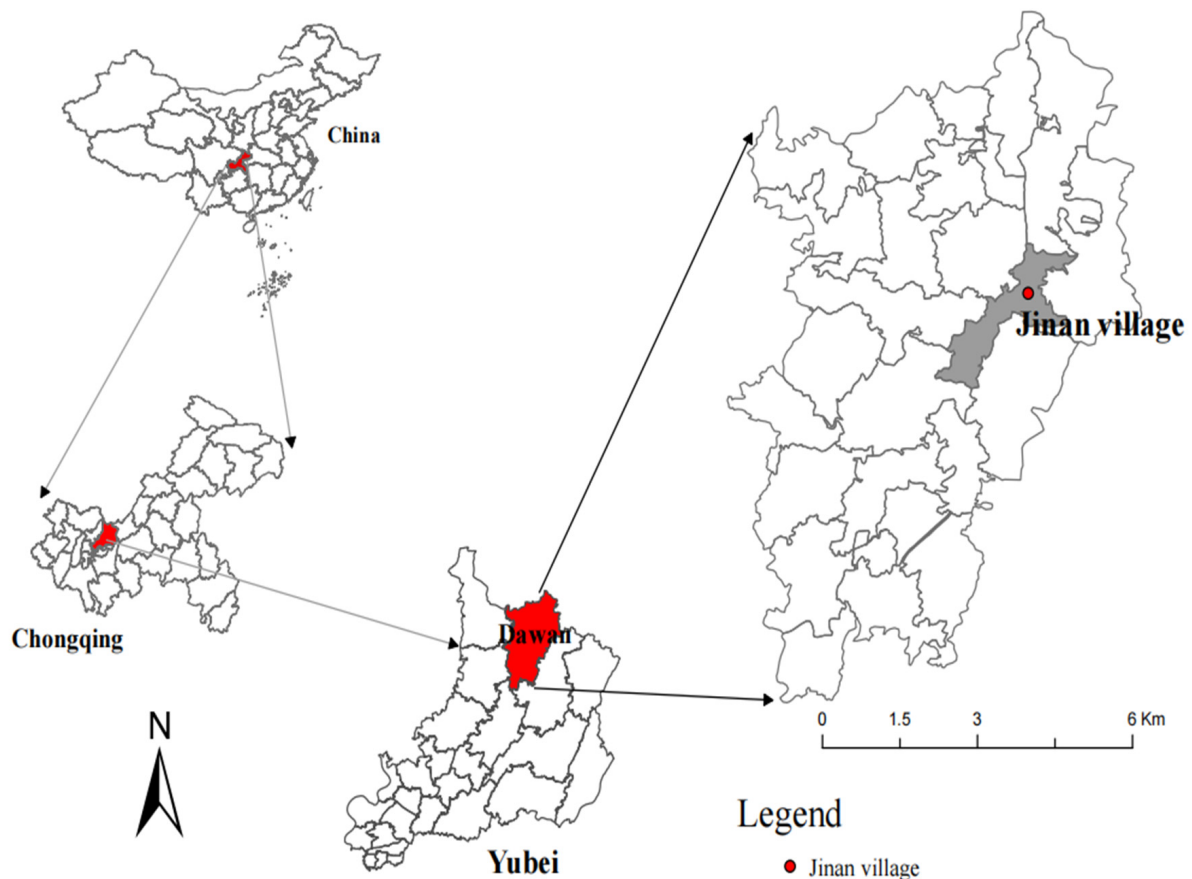


Figure 2. The research area of our case study.

3.2. Research Methods and Material Collection

This paper is a qualitative study aiming to investigate the correlation between rural land consolidation, rural democratization, and the rule of law. It also evaluates the impact of land consolidation on rural political democratization and legal consciousness. We visited the village twice, in August 2019 and April 2023. The purpose of the 2019 study was to investigate the implementation of land consolidation both within and outside of the village during the first phase period. Our 2023 study aimed to explore the attitudes of villagers

toward land transfers and their responses during the second phase of land consolidation, especially in the situation of the investor's inability to fulfill a contract.

In regard to material collection, in addition to data obtained from official sources, this study utilized semi-structured interviews and semi-participatory observation methods during fieldwork. For the semi-structured interview design (see Table 1 for details), we opted to conduct interviews with various types of participants in Jin'an Village. These actors include the township officials, the Village Committee, the village cadres, the villagers, and external investors. Firstly, we classified township officials, the Village Committee, and the village cadres as the first group of interviewees because they are typically considered official representatives and are distinct from the general population of villagers. During land consolidation, township officials, the Village Committee, and village cadres serve as a communication channel between villagers and investors. They also coordinate the work of the masses and handle the relationship between investors and villagers. Most of them know the fundamental conditions of the local community and are responsible for land consolidation work. This makes it easier for them to gain trust from investors and villagers. Secondly, villagers and external investors were classified into a second category of participants for the interviews. Villagers and external investors are the direct stakeholders in land consolidation projects, and the outcome of land consolidation is directly related to whether they can profit from it. As a result, they are more attentive to the land consolidation process and more responsive to the events that occur during it.

Table 1. Outline of the interview.

Object	Indicator	Question Description	
Township official	Overview of the land consolidation	Policies to support land consolidation in Jin'an Village?	
		Progress of land consolidation in Jin'an Village?	
Encouraging factors for land consolidation in Jin'an Village?			
Village committee		The demographic structure of the village?	
Village cadres		Innovative practices in the land consolidation process?	
		Difficulties encountered in the land consolidation process?	
Villagers		Production	Prospects for future development?
			Basic information about the family: population, income?
		Is there any engagement in land consolidation projects?	
External investors	Social interaction	Views on land consolidation?	
		Difficulties encountered in the land consolidation process?	
	Is there a way to communicate with the village committee or investors?		
Institution	Institution	Do village cadres visit homes?	
		Is professional help available from an organization or individual?	

During a three-day research period from 25 August to 27 August 2019, we engaged with other parties under the auspices of the local township government to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the land transfer procedure in Jin'an Village. Later, we visited five residents and were directed by them to two village cadres for interviews. In the process, we obtained more comprehensive information surrounding the land transfer procedures of Jin'an Village. In April 2023, we received an invitation from the Jin'an Village Committee to attend the villager conference as witnesses, which focused on land transfer negotiations in the Jin'an Village land transfer project due to difficulties encountered. The conference was held on 19 April. On 18 April, we organized a symposium prior to the commencement of the villager conference. Attendees consisted of the five villagers we visited in 2019 and three representatives suggested by other villagers. At the symposium, attendees discussed the critiques made by villagers towards the Jin'an Village Committee, village cadres, and ex-

ternal investors regarding land consolidation issues in Jin'an Village. Additionally, insights were provided regarding the expectations for the land consolidation project in the future. During the villager conference, we heard the defense of the village cadres against the villagers' criticism of them and learned about the final result of the conference. Although the method of semi-participatory observation creates a distance between ourselves and the villagers, provides a shallow understanding of the problem, and causes the observed information to be more scattered, this information was still able to validate the authenticity of the content of the interviews and add some details that were not mentioned during the interviews.

The interview outline was designed along the following lines: (1) Our first group of interviewees possesses knowledge of the official statistics and land consolidation policies of Jin'an Village. Thus, we aim to acquire fundamental information about land consolidation in Jin'an Village through our interviews with them. Additionally, inquiries concerning "innovative practices" and "expectations for future development" were devised to gauge their willingness to contribute to the advancement of the land consolidation project. Finally, we inquired about the challenges encountered during the land consolidation process with the goal of comprehending the perspectives of the first group of respondents on community feedback. This correlates with the extent to which they are willing to accept the results of the democratic deliberation conducted by the villagers. (2) Our questionnaire for the second group of interviewees was divided into three sections: "Production", "Social interaction", and "Institution", which corresponded to how they were treated in the land consolidation process. The "Production" section centers on the livelihoods of the villagers and shows if the land consolidation project has boosted their earnings. The section on "Social interaction" entails communication among the interviewees and other actors, providing insight into their degree of participation in land consolidation, their readiness to participate, and their particular practices in the participation process. The structure of this question clarifies whether a distinct process of democratic deliberation emerges during land consolidation and impacts the final result. The "Institution" section aimed to determine if the interviewees had obtained essential professional aid, specifically legal counsel. This would aid in assessing if there were external factors advocating for the democratization of the land consolidation procedure. In summary, the outline of the interview helped us grasp the impact of land consolidation as a tool for economic development on democracy and the rule of law.

4. Results: A Case of Land Consolidation in Jin'an Village

Since 2014, Dawan Town has undertaken large-scale land consolidation using the transfer of land management rights as the primary approach (this is called "land transfer"), and Jin'an Village is among them. Jin'an Village practices traditional agriculture, and most of the land in the village is arable land. As a result, the entities undertaking land consolidation within the village are primarily agro-forestry enterprises, aiming to enable large-scale cultivation. In 2019, upon arriving in Jin'an Village for our research, we discovered that the village had basically completed its land consolidation work, with the exception of some villagers who refused to lease their land. In 2023, we revisited Jin'an Village due to payment issues regarding the land consolidation project. Following the completion of the first phase of land consolidation work, the investors failed to fulfill their contractual rent obligations to the villagers. In other words, Jin'an Village encountered difficulties with revenue distribution during the second phase of the project. The purpose of our research at this point was to elucidate the perceptions of the villagers concerning land consolidation and their subsequent reactions when they did not receive land rents.

4.1. First Phase: Concentration of Fragmented Land

The status of land in Jin'an Village has captured the interest of many external investors. Since 2011, investors have been coming to Jin'an Village to investigate the local agricultural environment. In 2013, investors resolved to undertake land consolidation, aiming to gather

land under the control of villagers to form a contiguous farmland in Jin'an Village. Because the majority of Jin'an Village residents are elderly, they lack knowledge of external investors as well as an understanding of land consolidation and related policies. Consequently, when investors approached them, the villagers were wary and believed that the investors were trying to cheat them out of their land. In the end, the investors abandoned one-on-one negotiations with the villagers and opted to communicate with the Jin'an Village Committee members instead, intending to persuade the villagers to rent out their land use rights through the influence of the village cadres.

When the Jin'an Village Committee agreed to cooperate with investors on land consolidation, the village cadres became the main executors of the land transfer work. Village cadres went door-to-door throughout the village to persuade villagers to lease their land use rights. One villager told us, "Village cadres came to my house every week to publicize the land transfer work in the village, even several times a day. Sometimes they came alone, sometimes in groups of three or five. The village cadres told us that those investors had come to build the village, to help it develop, and to lead us to prosperity. The investors want to concentrate the land for large-scale agricultural development so that we can receive higher and higher rents in the future. Because the village cadres and we are all neighbors in the same village and they are more educated, I trust what they say" (Interview with villager, 20190826). Under the persuasion of village cadres, Jin'an villagers were enticed by the land rental rates, which exceeded the profits from their own agricultural activities. This addressed their apprehensions towards external investors. Nonetheless, Jin'an villagers were still reluctant to sign a land-use rights transfer contract with investors because they felt that "there is no guarantee of doing business with the outsiders".

Eventually, the procedure for the land transfer contract was concluded after a tripartite negotiation between the investors, the Village Committee, and the villagers. First, village cadres visited each villager's home to inform them that the Village Committee would negotiate with the investors and receive authorization from the villagers to sign the land transfer contract on their behalf. Second, the villager conference was convened in Jin'an Village to elect representatives, typically village cadres, to serve as intermediaries between the investors, the Village Committee, and the villagers. Finally, the Village Committee and the investors signed a land transfer contract, in which the investors took the lead in drafting the contract while the committee focused on negotiating the duration and price of the land lease. In this model, land transfer matters are negotiated by the Village Committee and investors rather than the villagers. The villagers are only required to collect the proceeds from land leasing. Villagers find it reassuring to entrust the land transfer work to village cadres. "We don't have the legal knowledge to read the contract. But we trust our elected representatives to sign the contracts on our behalf, and we are only responsible for collecting the rent" (Interview with villager, 20190826). As of 2014, external investors from Chongqing, China, Zhengsen Company, Jumu Agricultural Company, and Jinri Agricultural Company collaborated with the Jin'an Village Committee to finalize land consolidation in Jin'an Village.

4.2. Second Phase: Delivery of Land Proceeds

The land consolidation project in Jin'an Village faced difficulties in 2016. During the first two years after signing the contract, the Village Committee collected two years of land rent from the investors in advance, and the villagers were able to receive the proceeds from the land transfer on time, leaving most people optimistic about the future development of the land consolidation project in the village. In 2016, due to the investors' mistake in the pre-assessment of the agricultural project in Jin'an Village as well as the reduction in policy subsidies for external investors by the Yubei District Government, the investors in Jin'an Village were not able to realize a profit on the land transfer project and thus were unable to repay the land rent.

The investors' delayed payment of rent incited dissatisfaction among the villagers, which in turn translated into their concern about the land transfer situation. In our inter-

views, we found that only a minority of villagers expressed satisfaction towards the present status of land transfer in the village, and the majority of discontent largely stemmed from investors falling behind on rent owed for their land. The villagers complained, “How can they (referring to the external investors) have money to continue running the company when they can’t even afford to pay rent for the land? If they don’t pay us rent, we won’t let them produce on the land” (Interview with villager, 20230418). During the first phase of land consolidation, the villagers granted authorization for the Village Committee to sign the contract for transferring land to the investors. Therefore, in the case of rental defaults, the villagers instinctively sought help from the Jin’an Village Committee.

In the face of the villagers’ request, the Jin’an Village Committee was caught in a dilemma. Consequently, village cadres were dispatched to negotiate with the investors regarding overdue land lease payments. During the first few communications, the investors requested assistance from the Village Committee in deferring land rent payments owed to the villagers, citing cash flow challenges in the course of operation, and promised to provide the funds as soon as possible. When the village cadres delivered the response to the villagers, the villagers agreed to delay the rent payment based on their trust in the Village Committee. However, the investors failed to fulfill their promise and stopped paying the land rent to the villagers in 2016 without any justification. Since then, despite making repeated efforts to contact the investors, the village cadres have not achieved positive results. When the cadres relayed the status of their communication to the villagers, the villagers generally showed dissatisfaction, which even led to a division between the villagers and the village cadres in the villagers’ representative groups. One village representative said, “I am not like them (referring to village representatives with the status of village cadres); I am an ordinary villager, and I have to represent the interests of the villagers. Now that the investors can’t pay the rent, I can’t be a yes-man like those village cadres; I have to find the investors to solve the problem” (Interview with village representative, 20230418). The replies of the companies and village cadres were perceived by the villagers as a kind of deception, resulting in the trust problem between the villagers and the Village Committee and village cadres. The villagers requested that the Village Committee make public the contact information for the investors so that they could directly communicate with them. Based on our survey results, over 60% of the villagers involved in land transfers expressed their intention to reclaim land usage rights if an investor fails to pay the rent.

4.3. Final Result: Dissolution of the Contract through Litigation

The villagers’ strong dissatisfaction exerted pressure on the Village Committee, leading it to convene a villager conference to discuss the investors’ arrears in paying land rent. The villagers voiced discontent with the village officials at the conference, convinced that instead of fulfilling their promise to the villagers of “higher rents every year”, the village cadres had assisted the investors in delaying the delivery of rents when the investors were in arrears, to the detriment of the interests of the villagers. In the face of the villagers’ questioning, the village cadres argued, “Firstly, the land consolidation in Jin’an Village is a productive project that promotes the village’s economic development and boosts the residents’ earning potential. Secondly, while negotiating with the investors, the villagers witnessed their confidence in their capital reserves and management capabilities, and the investors paid the villagers a lump sum of two years’ land rent, which convinced everyone of the investors’ ability to pay the rent. Finally, it was the villagers who authorized the Village Committee to sign the land transfer contract with the investors, and the land rent was also paid directly to the villagers, and all the Village Committee could do was pass on the information” (Interview with village cadre, 20230419). The defense presented by the village cadres had minimal impact, and some members of the Village Committee were disqualified as cadres in this villager conference.

During the conference in Jin’an Village, all participants in the land transfer program were present to vote. Two solutions existed for the investors’ default on land rent: one was for the Village Committee to intervene and oblige the investors to find someone

else to fulfill the land transfer contract within six months. The other was for the Village Committee to file a lawsuit in local court, demanding that the contract be terminated, the investors compensate the villagers for damages, and the land be restored to its pre-contract state. Because the investors in Jin'an Village had ceased communication with the villagers, the villagers no longer trusted the investors. After a vote by the villagers, the villager conference decided to hire lawyers through the Village Committee to take legal action against the external investors. It is noteworthy that during pretrial preparations, the Village Committee was limited in its qualifications while carrying out litigation on behalf of the villagers. First of all, the lawyers could communicate directly with the villagers in order to comprehend their claims and examine relevant evidence documents. Secondly, the lawyers could present matters concerning litigation at village meetings without the Village Committee's involvement. Thirdly, the Village Committee required additional written authorization from the villagers for the disposition of certain specific rights, such as land replanting and re-demarcation of land boundaries. The villagers expressed satisfaction with the lawsuit preparations, saying, "It is reassuring to have lawyers in charge of the lawsuit. They (the lawyers) are more professional than the Village Committee, and they are more considerate of us and can fight for our greater interests in the litigation. The lawyers are highly detail-oriented and patiently respond to our queries. During my interaction with the lawyers, I realized the importance of knowing the law. I hope they will continue to give us help" (Interview with villager, 20230419). Ultimately, in June 2018, the Village Committee filed a lawsuit against the village's external investors, alleging a breach of contract.

5. Discussion

Land consolidation is a vital aspect of China's rural revitalization strategy, now implemented nationwide. The case study of Jin'an Village illustrates how land consolidation facilitates the democratization of politics and the promotion of legal consciousness within rural communities. Additionally, it offers an insight into how economic development, political development, and the rule of law are interrelated.

5.1. Internal Procedures Have Enhanced the Level of Political Democratization

Land consolidation is frequently considered a program that can significantly enhance the economic productivity of farms [73], and the land consolidation efforts in Jin'an Village support this viewpoint. As a means of fostering local economic growth, land consolidation in Jin'an Village has directly or indirectly helped in the democratization of community politics. Although the first phase of land consolidation was influenced by village cadres, the subsequent process demonstrated remarkable progress in democratic politics in Jin'an Village.

First, the practice of transparent voting within the village promoted democratization in Jin'an Village. In a traditional community, trust and reciprocity based on kinship and friendship are the main forces influencing decisions on public affairs [74,75]. As a result, the Village Committee, which acted as the hub of the village's social network, could usually make decisions on public affairs in the village without consulting all villagers. However, during the Jin'an Village land consolidation, the committee's power waned when confronted with external investors who were not affiliated with the village. Concentrated land transfer of the villagers' fragmented land use rights to investors made it impossible for the Village Committee to make choices on behalf of the villagers without obtaining the villagers' consent by convening a villager conference. Neubauer asserts that democratic politics requires two essential elements: "communication among members of the political system" and "the procedural norms of the system" to enable groups with competing preferences to convene and negotiate [76]. Jin'an Village convened the villager conference to discuss the transfer of land, with all community members encouraged to participate. The villagers participated actively in the village conference to discuss land transfer matters with the aim of enhancing their economic development capacity [63]. Objective information was exchanged through the open delivery of information by village cadres and discussions among villagers during the conference, promoting the necessary

communication for democratic decision-making. Villagers directly expressed their political choices through voting [63,77], the results of which expressed the public good recognized by the villagers [78] and determined the direction of development of land consolidation in Jin'an Village [64].

Second, the criticism of village cadres by the villagers during land consolidation setbacks was also evidence of an enhanced sense of democracy among the Jin'an villagers. Village cadres conform to the typical profile of local elites [79], who attain higher levels of influence through commanding greater social networks and human capital [80]. In the first phase of land consolidation in Jin'an Village, the village cadres were the first to understand and grasp the land consolidation policies and procedures. This, together with the cadre status granted to them by the Village Committee, ultimately formed the advantage of the village cadres in the process of communicating with the villagers [81]. When the villagers authorized the village cadres to carry out the acts of information liaison, external negotiation, and contract signing for the land transfer, these cadres actually gained a decisive role in controlling the land consolidation work in Jin'an Village [72]. This situation raises concerns regarding a potential divide between village cadres and villagers, where elites in positions of power could unequally distribute the benefits of rural reform to themselves [82,83]. The survey results from Jin'an Village revealed that while there were no conflicts regarding benefit distribution, there were substantial differences in perspectives between villagers and village cadres in the face of the failure of land consolidation. This created a sense of "welfare being violated by socio-political elites" among the villagers [70,84]. Disgruntled villagers contributed to the convening of the villager conference, with the villagers' criticism and the defense of the village cadres throughout the conference constituting a proceduralized idea of popular sovereignty [65,85], and the use of voting by villagers to determine the removal of village cadres underscoring the centrality of voting in consultative democracy and its ability to curtail power. Ultimately, villagers were able to alter their power relations with village cadres in the land consolidation process through their collective action [60,61,63]. In summary, land consolidation aimed at improving local economic development, regardless of its success or failure, will directly or indirectly promote the level of local political democratization.

5.2. External Measures Have Enhanced the Villagers' Legal Consciousness

Like the mainstream land consolidation approach, land consolidation in Jin'an Village is based on contracts under the influence of market factors. However, unlike the traditional process of individual transactions, land consolidation in Jin'an Village includes a first phase of authorization and negotiation and a second phase of legal action. The results of the land consolidation process are established through legal instruments, which may lower transaction costs and enhance trust in the security of property rights within the process of land consolidation [86].

During the first phase of land consolidation in Jin'an Village, the signing of contracts was central to the process, indicating that the concept of property rights has become a general consensus in the village. Typically, contracts serve to protect property rights [87], which in turn has been shown to have a decisive impact on economic growth [88]. Our survey found that there were two kinds of contracts in the initial phase of the land consolidation process: authorization contracts and land transfer contracts. Villagers need to issue authorization contracts to the Village Committee because Jin'an villagers are not well educated and most are elderly, so they are unable to negotiate effectively with outside investors themselves. In addition, individual land transactions in areas of land fragmentation have proved to be extremely costly and can cause the land market to become less active [89]. The decision by the villagers to sign an authorization contract with the Village Committee can serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, it can enable the Village Committee to fully utilize their advantages in collecting information and their social capital, which in turn can result in greater benefits in external negotiations [90,91]; on the other hand, such a contract can prove that the villagers have the legal rights to use the land and protect their property

rights to the land [92]. The land transfer contract is the result of negotiations between the Village Committee and the investors. North considers securing rights to property to be the key to sustained economic growth [93]. By establishing a land transfer contract that covers the rights and obligations of the participants, including the rent of the land and the duration of the lease, property rights can be protected by a formalized system of transferable ownership, which increases the certainty of the property [94]. Whether investors or villagers, a secure system of property rights trading increases investment willingness, leading to enhanced economic development. Furthermore, the fact that Jin'an villagers chose to sign the land transfer contract in a democratic process demonstrates that they, like investors, have confidence in China's legal system [95].

In the second phase of land consolidation, the approach of Jin'an villagers in responding to the breach of contract by the external investors is more proof of the villagers' heightened legal awareness. After the contract was signed, the villagers demonstrated a clear interest in maintaining the contract, even if the investors failed to pay the rent. Instead of terminating the contract immediately, the villagers actively contacted the investors through the Village Committee and agreed to a rent delivery delay. The behavior of the villagers indicates that they would like to see the investors continue to fulfill their contracts after they have overcome the difficulties, as the continuation of those contracts could contribute to the economic development of the village [87]. Even after the investors indicated their intent to cease payment of rent to the villagers, the villagers did not respond with unlawful retaliation but instead brought the dispute to court, expressing their dissatisfaction through the appropriate legal channels. Daniels asserts that access to justice is a crucial prerequisite for safeguarding property rights [96]. The villagers of Jin'an Village exemplify this notion by consciously choosing to resolve disputes and defend their property rights through an open and legal system [66]. The case of Jin'an Village illustrates that once the conventional economic model centered on clanship is dismantled and the law and institutions become the foundation of the local economic framework, the villagers of Jin'an Village will develop a strong sense of legal consciousness.

6. Conclusions

This paper takes a political economy approach to investigate the impact of land consolidation on the politics and concept of the rule of law in local societies when it is used to promote economic development in rural China. The case study of Jin'an Village in Dawan Town verified and supported the views that were presented in this paper. Land consolidation has contributed to the political democratization and legal consciousness of the countryside through the introduction of external investors and the marketization of land use rights. A general conclusion is that, regardless of the final outcome of a land consolidation project, as long as land consolidation is carried out on the ground, the people's sense of modernization, with democracy and the rule of law at its core, will be enhanced.

We identified two perspectives for observing the specific process of land consolidation: the procedural perspective and the relational perspective of participating members. The former examines the process of land consolidation, while the latter focuses on the relationships between the involved members. From a procedural perspective, the first phase of land consolidation is concerned with democratic decision-making procedures and the signing of contracts to protect property rights; the second phase revolves around the criticism of traditional political elites (village cadres) and judicial proceedings. From a relational perspective among participants within the village, the villagers have emerged as a new political force, replacing the traditional political elites represented by village cadres and taking charge of the decision-making process for public affairs. The villager conference becomes the sole decision-making body for public affairs; when confronted with external investors, the villagers prioritize safeguarding their property and obtaining anticipated returns. Accordingly, they opt to sign contracts and pursue legal action in court. In brief,

both perspectives affirm the conclusions of our previously mentioned study that land consolidation in rural China fosters local political democratization and legal consciousness.

6.1. Policy Recommendations

Although this was an area-specific study representing only the rural areas of Chongqing, China, our findings provide insights into achieving sustainable democratic politics and legal consciousness development from an economic development perspective. We hereby propose the following policy recommendations based on our study:

1. The focus should remain on promoting rural land consolidation projects and stimulating rural economic growth. It is important to aid villagers in developing fresh social capital and to design models for rural land transfer, including the setup of cooperative organizations that can be managed by villagers themselves.
2. Improving villagers' motivation to participate in the decision-making process of public affairs, enhancing their ability to access information and negotiate effectively, innovating negotiation models for land consolidation, and promoting their leadership roles in the land transfer process. For example, a permanent deliberative body of villagers could be created to review the decisions made by the Village Committee in instances where a villager conference is not held.
3. Strengthening the capacity of communities to provide professional services to farmers in accordance with the needs of land consolidation. For instance, village collectives and law firms have collaborated to establish specialized law offices in rural areas. This enables lawyers to offer legal assistance to villagers during land transfer processes on a consistent basis.
4. Strengthening the examination of external investor qualifications using villagers' satisfaction with investors as an external evaluation indicator to determine the level of political support for investors.

6.2. Methodological Limitations and Future Research Directions

Limitations of this study include the following: First, it is difficult for a single case study to represent the vast and varied patterns of development exhibited in rural China. In addition, our case focuses on the actual operation of the rural land consolidation process and thus may diverge from the ideal state of rural policy design. While our discussion provides an analytical paradigm for comprehending the correlation between land consolidation, democratic politics, and legal consciousness, it is crucial to consider specific geographical and historical contexts when examining these interrelationships. In order to be able to do so, further comparative research on the status of land transfers in different regions is needed.

Second, our qualitative case study relied on policy documents and local interviews. These limited sources do provide us with key insights into the relationship between rural land consolidation, democratic politics, and the rule of law; however, these sources refer only to external investors and village members and omit the government, which wields the greatest influence in China. We particularly look forward to future studies that will regard local governments as active participants in land consolidation and develop a framework for analyzing the association between governments, investors, and villages.

Finally, the consolidation of land in rural China is taking place within a broader context of transforming pre-modern agricultural production into an agro-industrial model, presenting a significant opportunity for rural modernization. Therefore, it is relevant to the discourse of post-capitalist rural transformation to describe how rural communities can utilize all available resources throughout the process of land consolidation to enhance their own development. This has the potential to generate a universal theory of rural development that unites both the East and West.

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