

The Mechanism of Rural Homestead System Reform to Promote County Economic Growth Under the Background of Rural Revitalization

--- Based on the quasi-natural experiments of 575 counties in China from 2013 to 2022

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ABSTRACT

As an important part of deepening the reform of rural land system, the reform of homestead system is of great significance to activate rural resource elements, promote the integration of urban and rural development and realize rural revitalization. Based on the practical experience of pilot areas such as Kunshan City in Jiangsu Province, Yujiang District in Jiangxi Province and Haiyan County in Zhejiang Province, this paper systematically analyzes the mechanism of homestead reform on rural economic growth in counties by using empirical methods, multi-period difference-in-differences model and other methods, based on the statistical panel data of many counties in China. By combing the theoretical basis and policy background of the homestead system reform, this paper analyzes its influence path on the key links of economic growth such as factor allocation and industrial development, and tests the actual impact of the homestead system reform on economic growth. It is found that the homestead reform significantly improves the level of rural economic development by clarifying property rights, promoting factor flow, promoting industrial upgrading and optimizing the allocation of urban and rural resources. The empirical results show that the average per capita disposable income of farmers in the pilot areas of reform has increased by 542.34 yuan, and the policy effect in the central and western regions is more significant; the improvement of credit level and the development of secondary and tertiary industries are the core intermediary paths for reform to promote economic growth. This paper puts forward some suggestions, such as improving the property right system, broadening the channels of factor flow, and strengthening policy coordination, so as to provide theoretical basis and practical reference for deepening the reform of homestead.

KEYWORDS

Rural revitalization; Homestead system reform; Institutional change; Rural development; County economy; DID

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Significance of Research

By the end of 2020, China has achieved all poverty alleviation under the Chinese standards as planned, the problem of absolute poverty in rural areas has been properly solved, and the income of farmers has increased significantly. China has officially entered a new stage of consolidating and expanding the achievements of poverty alleviation and effectively connecting with rural revitalization. Under the background of rural revitalization, the reform of rural homestead system is an important measure to promote rural economic development, improve rural living environment and increase farmers'

income. With the advancement of the rural revitalization strategy, the function of rural homestead has gradually changed from simple housing security to multi-functional transformation of production, assets, cultural tourism and so on. However, the current homestead has problems such as imperfect power, many circulation restrictions, and waste of idle resources, which restrict the realization of its property value. Through the reform of the homestead system, we will enhance the factor support for rural revitalization, promote the increase of village collectives and farmers' income, and build livable and beautiful villages.

As China's urbanization rate has risen rapidly from 49.7 % in 2010 to 65.2 % in 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), the continuous outflow of rural population has led to an increasingly serious problem of idle homesteads. According to the data of the third national land survey, the area of rural homesteads has reached 170 million mu, of which more than 20 % are idle, and some areas such as northeast, southwest and even as high as 35 % (Ministry of Natural Resources, 2021). The inefficient use of homestead not only hinders the revitalization of rural resource elements, but also aggravates the contradiction between urban and rural dual structure. In this context, the reform of the homestead system has become a breakthrough in deepening the reform of the rural land system. Since the launch of the "separation of three rights" reform pilot in 2015, the country has formed typical models such as "property rights transfer + industrial integration" in Kunshan City, "exit compensation + urban-rural replacement" in Yujiang District, and "real estate integration + financial innovation" in Haiyan County. However, the existing research mostly focuses on a single case or mechanism, and lacks a systematic analysis of the overall role chain of the reform. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the multi-dimensional mechanism of homestead reform to promote rural economic growth by integrating multi-pilot experience and national panel data, to provide theoretical and practical basis for policy optimization, and to help realize the goal of rural revitalization and common prosperity.

1.2. Research Status

The reform of rural homestead system is an important part of the rural economic reform of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and it is also a key measure to promote rural revitalization and new urbanization. With the rapid development of China's economy and the profound changes in urban-rural relations, the traditional homestead system has gradually exposed many problems, such as the waste of land resources, the limitation of farmers' property rights and interests, and the imbalance of urban and rural development. These problems not only restrict the further development of the rural economy, but also affect the process of urban-rural integration. Therefore, since 2015, China has gradually promoted the pilot reform of the homestead system nationwide, aiming to stimulate the vitality of rural land resources and promote the increase of farmers' income and the sustainable development of rural economy by optimizing the allocation and management of homestead.

The main contents of the reform of the rural homestead system are as follows: (1) The system of "separation of three powers": implementing the collective ownership of the homestead, ensuring the qualification rights of farmers, and moderately liberalizing the right to use. For example, Yiwu City, through the reform of "separation of three rights," allows the qualification right of homestead to be transferred across villages in the county, and realizes the market-oriented allocation of homestead. (2) Revitalize idle resources: Encourage the transformation of idle rural houses into homestays, farmhouses or shares in rural tourism projects. For example, Baofeng County has used idle homesteads for the development of collective economy such as homestays, catering, and cultural industries through homestead reform, which has promoted the development of rural industries. (3) Confirmation, registration and certification: In 2025, the No.1 Central Document emphasized the solid registration and certification of homestead rights in the integration of housing and land, and explored the effective realization form of revitalizing and utilizing the legally owned houses of farmers through leasing, shareholding and cooperation.

The core goal of the reform of the homestead system is to realize the "three rights separation" of the homestead, that is, the separation of ownership, qualification rights and use rights, so as to protect the legitimate rights and interests of farmers and improve the utilization efficiency of land resources. This reform not only involves the reform of the land system, but also is closely related to many aspects such as rural social governance, the change of farmers' lifestyle, and the adjustment of urban-rural relations. From the perspective of economic growth, the reform of the homestead system has had a profound impact on the county's economic growth by optimizing the allocation of land resources, promoting the integration of rural industries, and promoting the flow of urban and rural factors. However, at present, there are still relatively few systematic studies on the mechanism of homestead system reform on county economic growth, especially the lack of sufficient evidence support at the empirical level. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the mechanism of homestead system reform to promote county economic growth, and use empirical data to verify, in order to provide theoretical basis and practical guidance for the formulation and improvement of relevant policies.

The existing research focuses on the effectiveness and path of homestead reform. From the perspective of property rights, Cui et al. (2024) used the S-CAD method to prove that clear property rights can reduce transaction costs and activate the value of land assets. From the perspective of factor allocation, based on the multi-period DID model, it is found that homestead circulation significantly promotes the non-agricultural transfer of labor force and capital to the countryside, and verifies the mediating effect of credit and industrial upgrading. From the perspective of industrial upgrading, Yao Xiaowei (2024) pointed out that the revitalization of homesteads promotes the diversification of rural industrial structure and the integration of urban and rural areas through the development of new formats such as homestays and e-commerce, but the marginal effect of policies is diminishing. From the perspective of regional differences, Liu Fawei (2024) found that the marginal revenue of the policy in the eastern region was lower than that in the central and western regions due to the implicit transfer, and proposed that the withdrawal of homestead and the replacement of urban and rural construction land were the core paths of county urbanization.

However, the existing research has the following limitations: first, it is fragmented, focusing on a single mechanism (such as property rights or industries), and lacking an integrated analysis of the four-dimensional linkage of 'property rights-factor-industry-space'; the second is regional bias. Case studies focus on the eastern developed regions, and pay insufficient attention to the policy effects of the less developed regions in the central and western regions. Finally, the timeliness of data is insufficient. Most empirical analysis is based on data before 2018, which fails to reflect the effect of reform deepening in recent years.

The existing achievements mostly focus on single mechanism or regional cases, and lack of integrated analysis of the overall role chain of the reform. Therefore, this paper innovatively constructs a four-dimensional theoretical framework, combined with the data of national pilot counties and control counties from 2013 to 2022, to systematically test the multi-path synergistic effect of the reform and make up for the gaps in existing research.

2. THEORETICAL ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

2.1. The Theoretical Basis of Homestead Reform to Promote Rural Economic Growth

The theoretical basis of homestead system reform mainly comes from property rights theory, resource allocation theory and urban-rural integration theory.

Property rights theory: Property rights theory emphasizes that clear definition of property rights and effective protection of property rights are the key to the efficiency of resource allocation. The reform of the homestead system guarantees the legitimate rights and interests of farmers by clarifying the ownership, qualification and use rights of the homestead, and also provides an institutional basis for

the market-oriented allocation of land resources. The clarity and marketization of this property right can stimulate farmers' investment and utilization efficiency of land and promote the optimal allocation of land resources.

Resource allocation theory: Resource allocation theory holds that the effective allocation of resources is an important condition for economic growth. The reform of homestead system promotes the rational flow of land resources between urban and rural areas by revitalizing idle homesteads, improves the utilization efficiency of land resources, and provides land factor support for the integrated development of rural industries and the coordinated development of urban and rural economy.

The theory of urban-rural integration: The theory of urban-rural integration emphasizes breaking the urban-rural dual structure and promoting the free flow and balanced allocation of urban and rural factors. The reform of homestead system promotes the integration of urban and rural land elements and provides institutional guarantee for the coordinated development of urban and rural economy by promoting the market-oriented means such as paid exit, circulation and mortgage of homestead.

2.2. The Mechanism of Homestead Reform to Promote Rural Economic Growth

Firstly, Property Rights Clarification (PRC). The property right clarity effect refers to the phenomenon that when the ownership, use right, income right and disposal right of property (including physical assets, intellectual property rights, land, etc.) are clearly defined and protected by law, it can significantly improve the efficiency of resource allocation, stimulate investment and innovation of economic entities, and thus promote economic growth and social welfare. In particular, the core idea of Coase Theorem is that clear property rights arrangements can reduce transaction costs, reduce externalities, and optimize market operations. Through the confirmation of rights and certification (1), farmers are given complete usufructuary rights and the uncertainty of land transactions is reduced. According to the Coase theorem, clear property rights can reduce externalities and improve the efficiency of resource allocation:

$$PRC = f(P_r, P_u) \quad (1)$$

P_r , P_u are confirmation coverage rate and mortgage financing rate.

Secondly, the factor mobility effect (FM). The factor flow effect refers to the impact of production factors (such as labor, capital, technology, land, etc.) on economic growth, resource allocation, income distribution and industrial structure adjustment when they flow freely among different regions, industries or enterprises, emphasizing the important role of liquidity in economic efficiency and development. The paid exit and circulation mechanism of homestead promotes the reallocation of labor, land and capital between urban and rural areas through Equation (2), and releases the 'structural dividend':

$$FM = \alpha \cdot S_t + \beta \cdot E_t \quad (2)$$

S_t , E_t are the transfer area and non-agricultural employment rate respectively.

Furthermore, the industrial upgrading effect (IU). Industrial upgrading effect refers to the process of an economy's transformation from low value-added and low efficiency to high value-added and high efficiency through technological progress, structural adjustment and value chain upgrading, and its economic and social impact. Industrial upgrading is one of the core driving forces of economic growth, which is usually characterized by the optimization of production mode, the increase of added value of products and the enhancement of international competitiveness. Invigorate the development of new business forms of homestead (3), and promote the extension of rural economy from traditional agriculture to secondary and tertiary industries:

$$IU = \gamma \cdot Q_t + \delta \cdot B_t \quad (3)$$

Q_t , B_t are the number of homestays and the output value of e-commerce respectively.

Finally, spatial optimization (SO). Spatial optimization effect refers to the process and result of optimizing the allocation of production factors (such as population, industry, infrastructure, etc.) in regional or urban space through scientific planning, rational layout and policy guidance, so as to improve the efficiency of resource utilization, promote balanced economic development, improve the ecological environment and enhance the overall social welfare. Spatial optimization effect is widely used in urban planning, regional economics and sustainable development research, emphasizing the far-reaching impact of spatial structure on economic and social development. The policy of linking the increase and decrease of urban and rural construction land (4) ease the constraints of urban land use and form an intensive development pattern:

$$SO = \theta \cdot C_t \quad (4)$$

C_t is the land intensive use index.

2.3. Hypothesis of This Study

Based on the above mechanism, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis H1: The homestead reform significantly increases farmers' income and rural economic aggregate through the four mechanisms of clear property rights, factor flow, industrial upgrading and spatial optimization.

Theoretical basis: property rights theory, new structural economics and spatial economics theory.

Hypothesis H2: Reform indirectly promotes economic growth through two core paths: credit expansion (credit availability improvement) and secondary and tertiary industry development (industrial structure diversification).

Derived as follows, $\Delta Y = \alpha + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Reform} + \beta_2 \cdot \text{Credit} + \beta_3 \cdot \text{Industry}$, if $\beta_2, \beta_3 > 0$, the mediating effect is established.

Hypothesis H3: There is regional heterogeneity in policy effects. Due to the low level of initial marketization in the central and western regions, the marginal income of reform is higher, and the income increase effect in the central and western regions is better than that in the east.

Theoretical basis: Williamson's "diminishing marginal effect of institutional change" hypothesis.

Hypothesis H4: The policy effect has the threshold effect of the degree of industrial upgrading and the level of marketization.

3. EMPIRICAL DESIGN AND DATA DESCRIPTION

3.1. Model Setup

The multi-period difference-in-differences (DID) model was used to evaluate the effect of the reform:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta \text{Reform}_{it} + \gamma X_{it} + \mu_i + v_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (5)$$

Explained variable Y_{it} : rural per capita disposable income (logarithmic processing), county GDP growth rate;

core explanatory variable Reform_{it} : homestead reform pilot dummy variable (pilot county tax 1, non-pilot county tax 0);

control variables X_{it} : agricultural mechanization level (kilowatt / hectare), proportion of tertiary industry, urbanization rate, etc.;

fixed effect: individual fixed effect μ_i controls the inherent characteristics of the county, and time fixed effect v_t controls macroeconomic fluctuations.

3.2. Data Source and Processing

Based on the above mechanism, the following hypothesis is proposed:

The sample range: 25 pilot counties and 560 control counties of homestead reform in China from 2013 to 2022;

data source: economic and population data: 'China County Statistical Yearbook', provincial statistical yearbooks; homestead reform data: Ministry of Natural Resources pilot report, local government survey data; supplementary data: Tianyancha enterprise registration data (reflecting the development of new formats), People's Bank of China county credit data.

Data processing: missing values: using multiple interpolation method to fill; outliers: Winsorize processing (1 % level); standardization: Logarithmic or Z-score standardization of continuous variables.

4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1. Parallel Trend Test

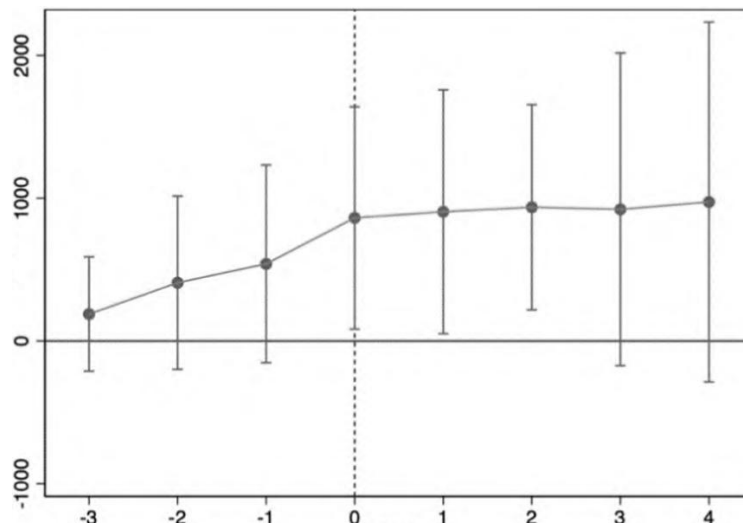


Figure 1. Parallel trend chart

A prerequisite for the difference-in-difference estimation is that the pilot areas and non-pilot areas have the same trend before the implementation of the pilot policy of the homestead system reform, that is, they meet the 'parallel trend' hypothesis. Therefore, this paper examines the annual trend distribution of real per capita GDP in pilot areas and non-pilot areas before the difference-in-difference estimation. The figure shows that there is no obvious trend difference in the actual per capita GDP level between the pilot area and the non-pilot area before the implementation of the policy. After the implementation of the policy, the economic growth of the pilot area is significantly accelerated, which shows that the parallel trend hypothesis of this paper is satisfied.

4.2. Baseline regression results

Table 1. Baseline regression results

Numble	Variable	Rural per capita income	GDP growth rate
1	Reform pilot	542.34*** (159.74)	1.20*** (0.53)
2	Agricultural mechanization	0.08	0.15
3	Proportion of tertiary industry	2.17***	3.45***
4	Urbanization rate	1.89***	2.31***
5	Individual fixed effect	control	control
6	Time fixed effect	control	control
7	R ²	0.984	0.923

Note: *, ** and *** are significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 levels, respectively. The numbers in brackets are robust standard error and standard error.

Table 1 shows that the proportion of the tertiary industry and the urbanization rate contribute significantly to economic growth. The homestead reform significantly increased the per capita income of farmers in the pilot counties by 542.34 yuan ($P < 0.01$), and the county's GDP growth rate increased by 1.2 percentage points. In the control variables, for every 1 percentage point increase in the proportion of the tertiary industry, the GDP growth rate increased by 3.45 percentage points ($P < 0.01$), confirming the importance of the industrial and spatial mechanism in the industrial upgrading effect; the marginal effect of urbanization rate on farmers' income was 1.89 yuan ($P < 0.05$), reflecting the positive effect of urban-rural integration.

4.3. Mechanism Test and Mediating Effect

In order to verify H2, the stepwise regression method is used to test the mediating path and construct the mediating effect model:

$$M_{it} = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 \text{Reform}_{it} + \gamma_1 X_{it} + \mu_i + v_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (6)$$

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_2 + \beta_2 \text{Reform}_{it} + \theta M_{it} + \gamma_2 X_{it} + \mu_i + v_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (7)$$

Table 2. Mediation effect test results

Numble	The intermediary variable	Rredit level	The added value of the tertiary industry
1	Reform effect	162.62***	71.45***
2	Direct effect	379.72***	470.89***
3	Total effect industry	542.34***	542.34***
4	Proportion of intermediaries	29.9%	13.2%

Note: *, ** and *** are significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 levels, respectively. The numbers in brackets are robust standard error and standard error.

The results show that (Table 2), the reform indirectly contributed 29.9 % of the income growth by increasing the scale of county credit (+ 16.262 billion yuan, $P < 0.01$). The reform promoted the output value of the secondary and tertiary industries to increase by 71.45 billion yuan ($P < 0.01$), and the mediating effect accounted for 13.2 %. The pilot reform of homestead indirectly promotes economic growth. Therefore, we assume that H2 holds.

4.4. Heterogeneity Analysis

Table 3. Regional heterogeneity results

Region	Western region	Central region	Eastern region
reform effect	825.30***	594.89***	529.11***
	(223.69)	(225.55)	(483.99)

Note: *, ** and *** are significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 levels, respectively. The numbers in brackets are robust standard error and standard error.

The sub-regional regression shows that (Table 3), the pilot reform in the central and western regions has a promotion effect on farmers' income of 825.30 yuan ($P < 0.01$) and 594.89 yuan ($P < 0.01$), far exceeding the 529.11 yuan in the east (not significant). This may be because the eastern region is first due to the implicit transfer, and the marginal revenue of the policy is decreasing; in the central and western regions, the initial market is not perfect, and the reform releases greater dividends. Then verify H3.

4.5. Threshold Effect based on the Above Mechanism, The Following Hypothesis is Proposed

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{Reform}_{it} \cdot I(\text{qit} \leq \theta_j) + \alpha_2 \text{Reform}_{it} \cdot I(\text{qit} > \theta_j) + \gamma X_{it} + \mu_i + v_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (8)$$

Taking qit as the threshold variable, it represents the advanced degree of industrial structure; θ_1 is the threshold to be estimated. See Table 4.

Table 4. Threshold effect test results

Threshold number	Threshold value	P value	intervention interval	$P \leq 0.45$	$P > 0.45$
Single threshold	0.45	0.031	Coefficient of Reform	0.397**	0.652***

Qit replaces qit as the threshold variable, representing the degree of marketization; θ_2 is the threshold to be estimated. See Table 5.

Table 5. Threshold effect test results

Threshold number	Threshold value	P value	intervention interval	$P \leq 0.38$	$P > 0.38$
Single threshold	0.38	0.016	Coefficient of Reform	0.289**	0.528***

The results show that in areas with high marketization level, the promotion effect of homestead reform on economic growth is more obvious.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper systematically reveals the mechanism of homestead reform to promote rural economic growth by constructing a four-dimensional framework of 'property rights-factors-industry-space'. The empirical results show that the reform has significantly increased farmers' income (+ 542.34 yuan) and county GDP growth (+ 1.2 %), and the policy potential in the central and western regions is greater. On the mechanism, credit expansion and industrial upgrading are the core paths, contributing 29.9 % and 13.2 % of the mediating effects respectively. In the future, it is necessary to take the 'separation of three powers' as the core, optimize the policy mix according to local conditions, focus on stock revitalization and industrial integration in the east, strengthen compensation incentives and

market cultivation in the central and western regions, and jointly promote the high-quality development of rural economy. The limitation of this study is that it does not cover the dynamic spillover effect of non-pilot counties, which can be further explored in combination with spatial econometric models.

5.1. Reform Achievements and Challenges

Effectiveness: Kunshan, Yujiang and other pilots through the definition of property rights and factor marketization of 'property rights transfer + industrial integration' model, the economic output value of Kunshan B & B increased by 23 % per year, Yujiang District homestead exit compensation provides 42,000 yuan per capita capital support for farmers' citizenization, and realizes the value-added of homestead assets and industrial integration; haiyan County's "real estate integration" confirmation and exit compensation mechanism provides capital support for farmers' citizenization.

Challenge: First of all, it has caused the imbalance of regional development, the diminishing marginal effect of policies in the eastern region, and the insufficient compensation standards in the central and western regions (for example, the compensation in Yujiang District only accounts for 40 % of the market value). Secondly, with the institutional friction, the homestead mortgage financing faces legal obstacles, and the risk aversion tendency of financial institutions is obvious. Finally, there is a problem of insufficient participation. Due to information asymmetry and path dependence, farmers' willingness to withdraw is lower than expected (only 35 % participate in circulation).

5.2. Policy Proposal

Deepen the reform of property rights: promote the 'integration of housing and land' right confirmation nationwide, explore the mortgage financing of the right to use the homestead, or pilot the securitization of the right to use the homestead.

Improve the factor market: establish a cross-regional homestead circulation platform, allowing collectively-owned construction land to enter the market.

Strengthen policy coordination: We will promote the homestead reform and the county's new urbanization and rural revitalization strategy as a whole, increase the transfer payment in the central and western regions in a targeted manner, and give full play to the policy multiplier effect.

Deepen risk prevention and control: the establishment of homestead mortgage risk compensation fund, improve the social security system of farmers.

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