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Institutional Diversity or Isomorphism? Research on the Evolution of Collective-Owned Construction Land Marketization Reform since the 1990s—The Case of Shunde and Wujiang, China

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Abstract: Collective-owned construction land (CCL) marketization is an important driving force for the rapid development of China's rural economy and society. Recognizing the trends and logic of its institutional changes is important for better understanding the central-local interrelation and the new-round CCL reform. Throughout the process of rural land reform since China's reform and opening up, together with the unified policy guidance from the central government, the diversity of local practices and the trend of convergence in the development process deserve attention. Based on the institutional isomorphism theory, this paper analyzes the evolution of the CCL system in Shunde, Guangdong Province, and Wujiang, Jiangsu Province, since the 1990s, empirically demonstrating the trend of convergence based on diversity and exploring the underlying influencing mechanisms. The study finds that the evolutionary practice is characterized by the trend of ephemeral convergence represented by the shared cooperative and the land reservation reform and that of coeval convergence represented by the construction land nationalization. Top-down coercive pressure, horizontal imitative learning pressure, and governance-embedded normative pressure jointly shape the evolutionary convergence. This paper argues that the diversity of local experiments should be allowed and encouraged based on local characteristics. Policy flexibility should be further considered by the central government when formulating uniform policies for local adaptability.

Keywords: collective-owned construction land; institutional isomorphism; path-dependence; the pearl river delta region; southern Jiangsu



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1. Introduction

The land system is a fundamental system for economic and social development and an essential technique for administration according to law. The primary institution of Chinese rural land is the collective ownership system with a household contract system. Since the reform and opening up, along with the rapid economic and social development, the demand for construction land has been increasing, for which the Chinese government has carried out several rounds of land system reform. During this period, a large amount of rural land was converted to construction land, and rapid urbanization was experienced.

China's rural land system reform has addressed and solved various problems at different stages. The No.1 Document of the Central Committee and the National Rural Work Conference in 1982 confirmed the legitimacy of the household contract responsibility system. Coupled with the growth of farmers' income in the 1990s, which brought about a strong demand for homestead land expansion and housing modernization [1], the contradiction between agricultural land protection and construction land expansion has gradually been highlighted. In this context, the *Land Management Act Amendment 1998* and the *Decision on Deepening Reform and Strengthening Land Management 2004* issued by the

State Council emphasize the protection of agricultural land and prevention of construction land expansion. Meanwhile, the use right transfer is encouraged to raise the utilization efficiency of rural construction land. In 2011, the urbanization rate of China exceeded 50%, which began to enter the middle and late stages of urbanization. The rural development of non-agriculturalization and the negative externality caused by local short-sightedness and opportunism have become more complicated and even led to a lock-in path of low-quality and low-efficiency economic, social, and spatial development [2]. To solve these problems, the reform direction of rural land was formulated in the *Decision on Several Major Issues of Comprehensively Deepening Reform* adopted by the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee in 2013. The reform framework of “three types of rural land reform” was established in 2015 through the *Opinions on the Pilot Work of Reforming the Rural Land Expropriation, Collective Construction Land into the Market, and Homestead Land System*. Since then, rural areas in economically developed regions have started to explore the regeneration and reuse of collective-owned construction land (CCL). The amendment to the *Land Management Law* in 2019, the *general scheme of the comprehensive pilot reform of market-based factor allocation* promulgated by the General Office of the State Council in 2021 and the *No. 1 document* of the central government in 2022 further emphasize the implementation of putting collective construction land on the market with the same market, the same rights, the same price, and the same responsibilities, as well as the cross-regional flow of surplus indicators.

During the same period, local governments have made adaptive explorations under the unified institutional framework of the central government. As representatives of two advanced regions in China’s reform and opening up, Shunde in Guangdong province and Wujiang in Jiangsu province, faced with the massive land demand brought about by rapid industrialization, chose a differentiated path of CCL marketization at the beginning based on their history, culture, and social and economic conditions. In particular, Shunde implemented a “dual-track” approach in which CCL transfer and land expropriation are carried out simultaneously. In this process, the local government receives a certain percentage of the land revenue in both CCL and state-owned construction land (SCL) transfers. At the same time, the rural collectives retain ownership of the land and participate fully in the process of rural industrialization by CCL marketization [3]. Wujiang, on the other hand, adopted a “single-track” approach to land nationalization by directly completing land marketization through land expropriation, with the local government monopolizing the land revenue from the SCL marketization [4]. It can be observed that the two places diversified the measurement of property rights empowerment and implementation based on the central government’s requirements, which is in contrast to the unified measurement in urban land policies throughout the country. It can be supposed that in the practice of rural land system reform, local governments have chosen differentiated implementation paths according to their culture and socio-economic conditions, presenting a phenomenon of institutional diversification.

The fact that institutional arrangements are diverse is a distinctive feature of institutional change. Ostrom, a representative of rational institutional choice theory, pointed out that institutional diversity constitutes the most fundamental human fact [5]. Many scholars have summarized the multiple influencing factors that lead to institutional diversity. Differences in the institutional structure of initial social systems bring about pluralism in local practices such as economic, social, cultural, and historical traditions, the structure and power of historical blocs, the way interest groups play games, and the forms of public decision-making [6,7]. For China, the process of institutional diversity has also been further accelerated by the institutional innovation pressure of local governments and the interaction between the masses and the state apparatus after the reform and opening up [8]. This is also valid for institutional change explanations based on a historical institutionalist perspective [9].

The current research on the CCL institutional change mainly focuses on the development history, evolutionary characteristics, and driving factors of the CCL marketization system. According to North’s theory, institutional change is a gradual and path-dependent

self-evolution of self-organizing systems [10]. Once the system is formed, certain arrangements form the trenches that block the transition of initial choices [11–13]. Since the reform and opening up, the CCL marketization reform has gone through four evolutionary stages [14], showing the “symbiotic evolution” characteristics [15]. The CCL transfer system is a steady evolution and gradual adjustment under the multiple games of multiple subjects [16]. Some scholars also point out that the CCL reform system in China results from the interaction between coercive and induced change [17,18]. When the change costs are smaller than the potential benefits, institutional change is “induced” [19–21]. The government also has a scale effect rather than path locking or dependence in providing institutional arrangements and therefore may “force” institutional change [10,22–24]. However, Ho challenges such static explanatory frameworks arguing that they remain neoclassical theories, lacking in the delineation of ever-changing and conflicting processes of institutional change [25]. Furthermore, such studies tend to focus on revealing the path dependence under uncertainty as an impediment to institutional reform [26], which is used to justify the ‘wide variety’ of collective construction land systems [27]. China is a centralized unitary state, where the decision-making behavior of local governments at all levels is a rational response to the deployment of higher levels. The above explanation ignores the objective existence of centralization and the influence of formal policies of the central government on institutional change. Ho finds that the commonly understood blurring of property rights and seemingly “perverse” and “inefficient” institutions persisted during the economic prosperity of China’s reform and opening up, and he argues that it was the integrity of this vast state apparatus that ensured the proper functioning of the system [28]. Shin similarly identifies central government intervention in local government in the case of Seoul, South Korea [29], and Troisi further suggests that illegal land use is a mimetic behavior that arises in low-quality local regulation and enforcement [30]. However, the existing studies have yet to reveal the phenomenon of isomorphism and the mechanisms influencing it in different regions during the CCL marketization. Therefore, the question worth answering is whether the trend of local institutional reform will continue to diversify under the central government’s pressure or whether there will be a trend of isomorphism. If there is a trend of isomorphism, what are the reasons behind it?

Therefore, this paper attempts to introduce institutional isomorphism theory into the evolution of the local practice of CCL system reform. First, the theory of institutional isomorphism and its relationship with CCL property right is demonstrated based on theoretical research. Second, the representative areas of CCL reform, Shunde in Guangdong province and Wujiang in Jiangsu province, are selected to observe the dynamic evolution of their CCL systems since the 1990s to empirically demonstrate the evolutionary trend and the influence mechanism of isomorphism. Theoretically, firstly, although there is extensive international literature on institutional isomorphism [6,19,31–33], given that CCL is a highly Chinese discourse, there are relatively few international scholars who have addressed the isomorphism of CCL systems. Uncovering the phenomenon of convergence in the CCL marketization in China helps increase the theoretical dialogue with international scholars at the international level. It enriches the study of institutional isomorphism theory in the rural land system evolution. Secondly, isomorphism and diversity have always been essential perspectives for viewing central-land relations in the process of institutional reform. This study is helpful in further understanding the evolutionary process of central-local interaction in China and the adaptation of centralized policies at the local level. In terms of practice, this study chooses Shunde and Wujiang as case areas to empirically compare the relationship between rural collectives and local governments. They are located in two urban agglomerations with very different economic development patterns, the Pearl River Delta and the Yangtze River Delta. This can reflect the differences in the evolutionary paths of government-collective relations under different economic development models, which in turn can help to perceive the current understanding of farmers’ property rights in collective-owned land and have important implications for the new round of collective construction land reform aiming at the equal rights, equal price, and equal land.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework, including intuitional isomorphism and land property right theories. Section 3 shows the isomorphic policy and property right trend in two representative areas. In Section 4, we further analyze the influencing mechanism of multiple factors. After that, we further discuss the bi-directional oscillation of CCL institutional change and attitudes towards isomorphic trends in Section 5. At last, Section 6 is the conclusion of the paper.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Institutional Isomorphism

From the perspective of evolutionary rationality, an institution is “a set of behavioral rules that govern specific behaviors and relationships” [34,35], and institutional diversity is an outward expression based on rational choice institutionalism and historical institutionalism [36]. Beyond the two institutionalism, Hall and Taylor identified a third batch, namely organizational\sociological institutionalism [37]. DiMaggio and Powell argue that the engine of rationalization and bureaucratization has shifted from competitive markets to states and industries [38]. Once an organization has emerged in a field, the following paradox arises: rational actors try to change their organization while making it increasingly similar. This theory views institutionalization as a limiting process that forces agents or organizations to be regulated by external pressures, referred to as Institutional Isomorphism.

According to Hawley [39], ‘isomorphism’ is an obligatory process whereby individuals become similar to other individuals to cope with the same environmental conditions. At the aggregate level, such an approach suggests that organizational characteristics change to improve adaptation to environmental characteristics. The environment’s capacity influences the number of organizations in an aggregate. At the same time, organizational diversity is isomorphic to environmental diversity. Hannan and Freeman [40] extend Hawley’s view by arguing that isomorphism arises because non-optimal organizational forms are eliminated or because organizational decision-makers learn to respond appropriately and adapt their behaviors. According to Meyer [41] and Fennell [42], organizations compete not only for resources and customers but also for political power and institutional legitimacy to gain social and economic legitimacy. Therefore, DiMaggio and Powell argue that institutional isomorphism is a “useful tool for understanding the politics and rituals” that permeate many modern organizations and lives [38]. Both scholars point out that the evolution of institutional isomorphism is based on three mechanisms, coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism, which interact to drive a continuous convergence between different organizations and policies.

First, the coercive mechanism stems from the vertical control and pressure of the higher-level government on the lower-level government. Due to authoritative pressure, lower-level governments must comply with higher-level requirements when formulating and introducing local practices [43,44]. In China, for example, provincial governments must conform to the central government’s needs in developing and introducing CCL reform policies, eliminating political overstepping. It is commonly believed that China’s authoritarian system motivates lower-level local government officials to be more inclined to obey instructions and demands for political promotion and official position preservation. Local governments may have a high convergence in the policy implementation developed by the central government or ministry agencies.

Second, imitative behaviors in highly uncertain environments are decisions and actions taken to mitigate risks. This limited rationality is often expressed in institutional change as an experiment of trial and error, learning, imitation, and innovation under uncertainty. It forms common knowledge and beliefs in collective cognition and learning among agents. In China, all levels of government are considered subject to imitation mechanisms. This imitation stems from learning from the “good” practices of higher governments and is also an interaction mechanism between the horizontal levels [45].

Third, normative isomorphism stems primarily from specialization, which consists of a common cognitive foundation developed by internal organization members and an

organizational structure that allows for the rapid diffusion of new patterns. Staff with a common cognitive foundation will guide the organization along the same or similar paths.

2.2. Property Rights of CCL in China

The CCL marketization is the transfer of rights among the subjects and the expansion and contraction of rights in property rights empowerment and implementation. According to Coase, the essence of the transaction is that of property rights, and different property rights system create different transaction costs [46]. Property rights empowerment and implementation are the core of the land system [47]. The former clarifies the right subjects and their interest structures, and the latter determines the actual use and operation, transfer, and transaction mode of property rights and revenue allocation. The empowerment and the implementation jointly determine the structure and function of land property rights [48].

At the current stage in China, the subject of a property right empowerment of CCL includes the government subject, rural collective subject, and market subject. The first is the government subject referring to local governments. They make local land policies within the range of the national legislative framework and promote local economic development to maximize local benefits. The second is the rural collective subject, including collective economic organizations and individual villagers. They are responsible for managing land assets within their administrative areas to maximize the revenue of collectives and individuals. The third is the market subject comprising enterprises or individuals that use CCL due to rent, transfer, and other activities. They focus on business activities on the land to maximize self-employment revenue. The game-playing of these three subjects jointly promotes the evolution of the property right structure. Due to the particular land ownership system of China, land property right usually includes land ownership right, land use right (LUR), and land revenue right (LRR), among which land use right consists of the rights of possession, employ, proceed, and disposal (Figure 1). The right of disposal can be further categorized into transfer, lease, and mortgage. Considering that there have been relatively few changes concerning ownership in the collective construction land system in the past three decades, the main changes concern the benefit allocation. Therefore, this paper focuses on the transfer of LRRs between subjects, the expansion and contraction of their rights, and the use rights transfer associated with them.

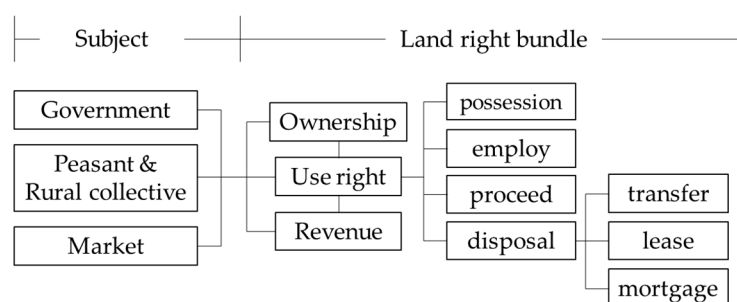


Figure 1. Land property rights of collective-owned construction land.

There are multiple associations between static and dynamic, horizontal and vertical institutions in multiple domains, which can be understood as the coeval and ephemeral institutional isomorphism. The intrinsic motives of this isomorphism may include coercive, imitative, and normative mechanisms. These reciprocal mechanisms lead to rational choice behavior of local governments, which in turn leads to convergence in the reform process. The analytical framework of this paper is thus constructed (Figure 2). Our work is divided into three parts: theoretical framework, the coeval and ephemeral isomorphism trend of policy and property rights, and the isomorphic influencing mechanism, including coercive, mimetic, and normative pressure. Specifically, firstly, the institutional isomorphism theory and the structure of property rights of collective construction land in China are introduced as the premise assumptions of this study; secondly, the coeval and ephemeral

policy isomorphism in the evolution of the CCL marketization and the underlying isomorphic characteristics of local government and collective revenue rights are empirically demonstrated using Shunde in Guangdong province and Wujiang in Jiangsu province as examples; thirdly, through the institutional isomorphism theory, the pressure mechanisms of coercive, imitative, and normative process in both places are empirically demonstrated. In this way, we uncover diversity and isomorphism trends the CCL marketization in China and its influence mechanisms.

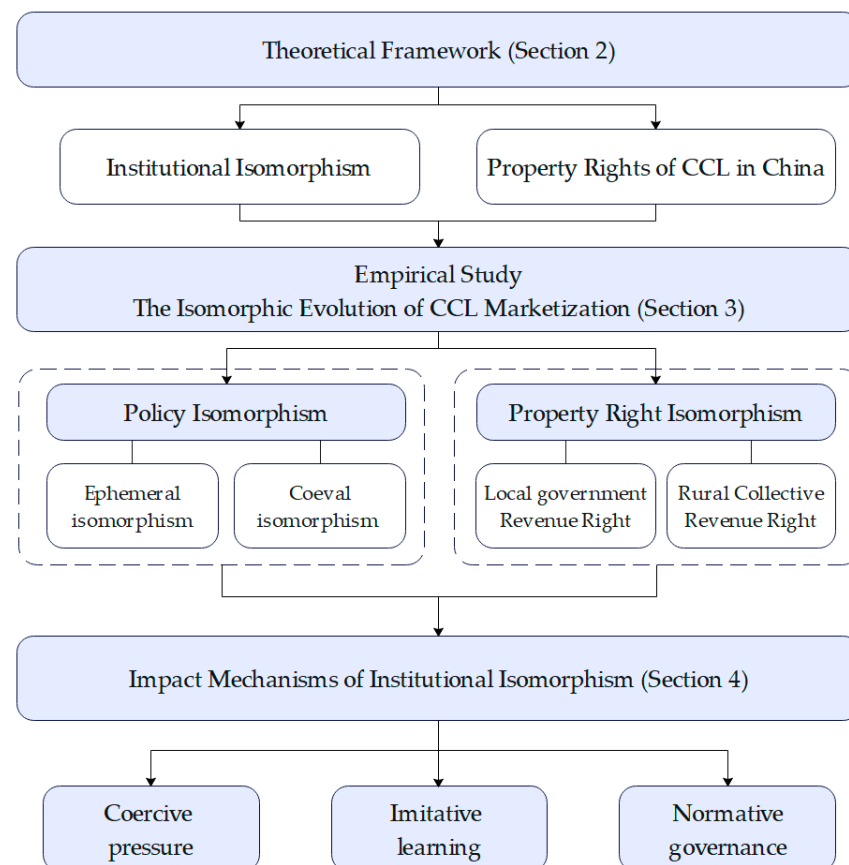


Figure 2. The technical route diagram.

3. The isomorphism of Shunde and Wujiang

In the following section, the evolutionary paths of CCL marketization since the 1990s in Shunde District in Guangdong province and Wujiang District in Jiangsu province are compared, and the convergence of the two places is empirically demonstrated.

Shunde District belongs to Foshan Municipality, Guangdong Province, with a total area of 806 km²; Wujiang District belongs to Suzhou Municipality, Jiangsu Province, with a total area of 1177 km², including 267 km² of water area (Figure 3). They are located in the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta regions, respectively, which are at the forefront of China's reform and opening up. They have similar stages of development, management authority, and reform goals to ensure comparability. In particular, since the 1990s, the rapid economic and social development of the two areas has repeatedly ranked among the top 100 counties (districts) in China, and they are representative areas of county economic development in China. Second, they have experienced the administrative evolution from county to municipal district. Third, they also faced similar problems at the beginning of the socialist market economy establishment, rapid industrialization, and urban regeneration.

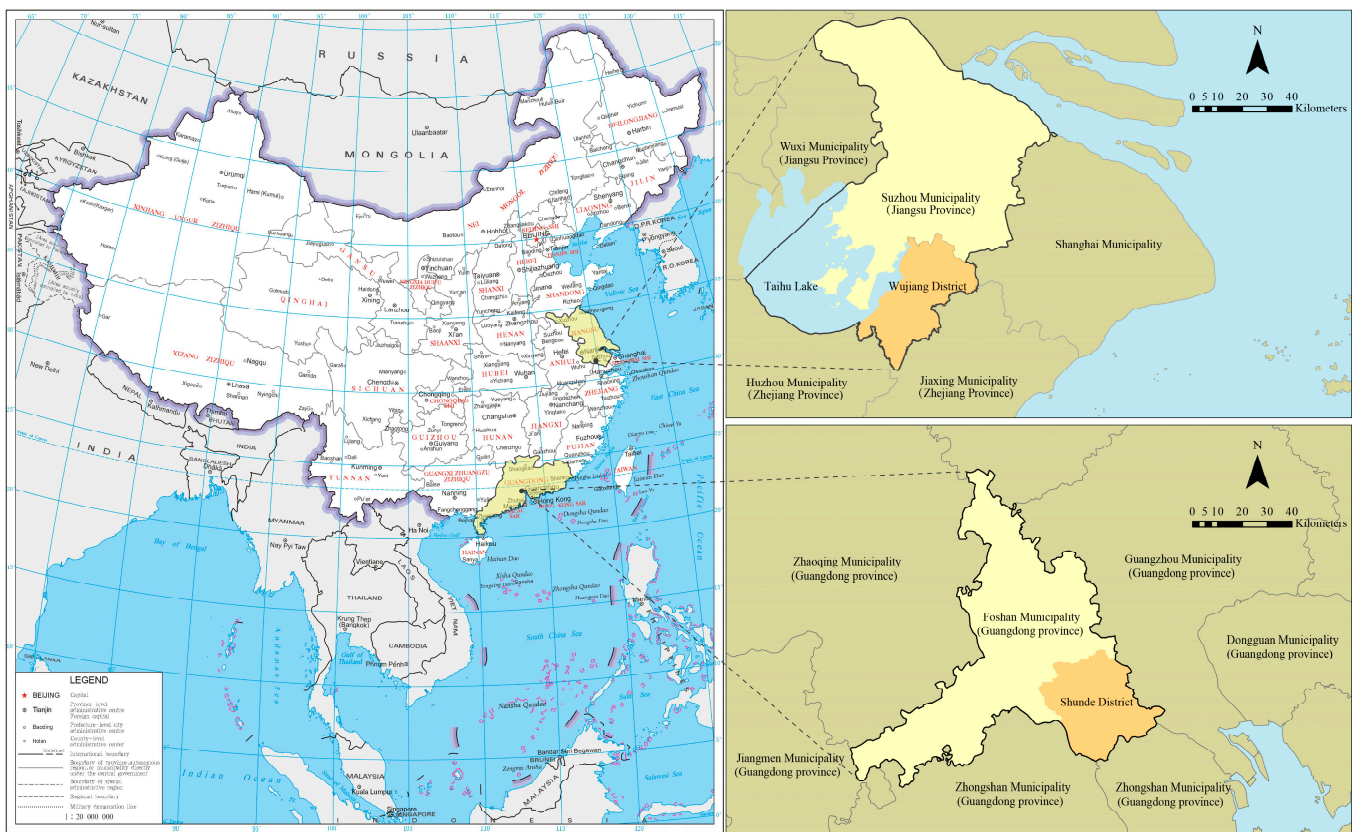


Figure 3. Location of Shunde in Guangdong province and Wujiang in Jiangsu province.

This study applies institutional analysis methods to analyze the policies of the CCL marketization in Shunde and Wujiang and observes the evolution of property rights behind the policies. On this basis, using land survey data, the spatial distribution of the scale of SCL and CCL is mapped through GIS analysis and mathematical statistical analysis. The scale of the two types of land reflects the changes in the local government's revenue right in the CCL reform and the changes in the village collective's revenue right through the changes in collective assets, which is used to support the isomorphic trends brought by the evolution of property rights structures.

The data covered in this study include policy information, land survey data, and statistical yearbook data. Among them, policy information includes policy documents on CCL marketization in the central government as well as Shunde and Wujiang governments from 1990 to 2018; land survey data include the spatial distribution of SCL and CCL in 1992, 2002, 2010, and 2018, and this paper uses GIS software to count the scale of each type of land; the statistical yearbook from 1992 to 2018 contains the collective assets of the two districts.

3.1. Policy Isomorphism

Based on their socio-economic, cultural, and historical traditions, Shunde and Wujiang chose the differentiated paths of “dual-track” and “single-track” as mentioned in Section 1 at the beginning of CCL marketization. However, with the changing demands of economic development, specific convergence characteristics emerged between their policies (Figure 4).

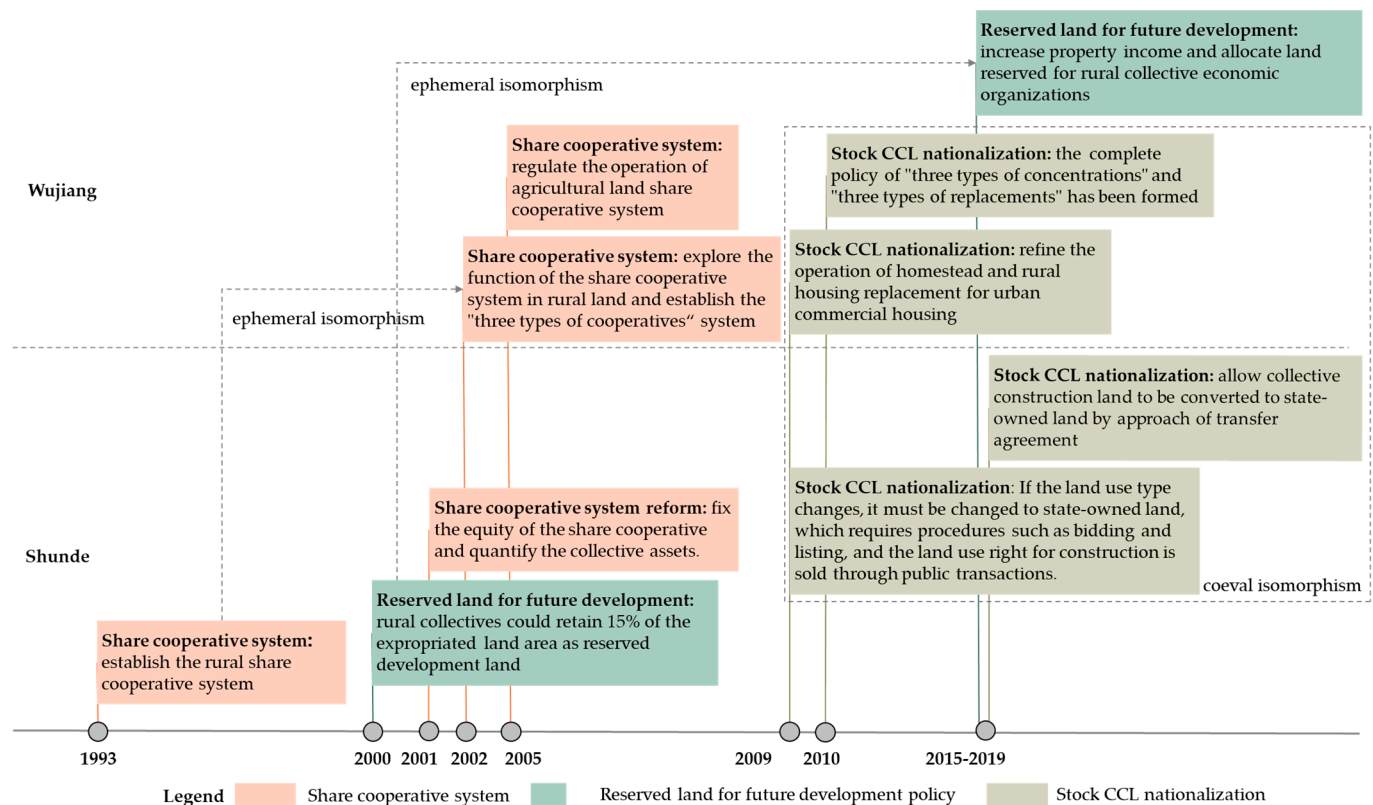


Figure 4. Changes in the collective-owned construction land system in Shunde and Wujiang since the 1990s.

The first one is the shared cooperative system. In 1993, Shunde began to reform the rural shared cooperative system by grouping the assets of economic organizations originally formed by production teams into village-level cooperatives. The share types are divided into collective shares and member shares, which are managed and operated by the village-level shared cooperatives. In 2002, Wujiang introduced the *Implementation Opinions on Actively Exploring the Reform of the Rural Land Shared Cooperative System* and *Implementation Opinions on the Reform of the Rural Community Shared Cooperative System (for Trial Implementation)*, drawing on the experience of the Shunde to explore the function of the shared cooperative system in rural land, although this policy is only for agricultural land without including collective construction land. The idea of quantifying equity is consistent and is an adaptive innovation based on the experience from the pearl river delta region.

The second one is the land reservation policy. Around 2000, in order to solve the work and living problems of land-expropriated farmers, Shunde clarified in the policy of *Interim Regulations on the Conversion, Expropriation and Compensated Use of Agricultural Land* and the *Pilot Program for the Reform of the Land Expropriation System* that village collectives could retain 15% of the expropriated land area as reserved development land, which safeguards the assets and sustainable income of collective economic organizations. Similarly, Wujiang's policy of "three types of optimizations and protection"¹ since 2015 also proposes establishing a long-term mechanism to increase farmers' income. The reserved land for rural collective economic organizations can be allocated based on 3 m² construction land per capita.

The third one is the stock CCL nationalization. Around 2010, in order to solve the problem of a shortage of land resources and inefficient construction land, Shunde and Wujiang both explored the regeneration of the stock construction land. Shunde has issued the *Notice of Implementation Opinions on Promoting "Three Old Transformation"*² and *Implementation Measures of Shunde District Urban Regeneration ("Three Old Transformation")*², compiling the

Shunde District “Three Old transformations” planning (2009–2020). At the same time, Shunde also introduced a series of policies for renovating rural industrial parks, and the CCL is allowed to be converted to state-owned construction land (SCL). For Wujiang, complete policies of “three types of concentrations”, “three types of replacements”³, and “three types of optimizations and protection” have been gradually issued and implemented during the same period. These policies are designed to promote optimal land allocation, efficient use of the stock construction land, and effective control of the newly added construction land.

Regarding policy objectives and measures, the core of policy convergence between the two places is the ephemeral isomorphism represented by the reform of the shared cooperative system and the land reservation system and the coeval isomorphism represented by the renewal of the stock CCL nationalization (Figure 2).

3.2. Property Right Isomorphism

The essence of policy convergence is the land property right convergence, which the LRR evolution of local government and rural collective can be analyzed.

(1) Isomorphic evolution of local government’s LRRs

In general, the LRRs of governments in two places have undergone a process from expansion to contraction (Figure 3). In the late 1980s, Shunde did not allocate the revenue to the government in the invisible transfer of CCL. With the gradual standardization of the CCL transfer in 2001, the government began to charge a certain percentage of the transfer revenue. The LRR subject was thus expanded from the rural collective to the local government, which had the revenue right of the CCL transfer for the first time. As the CCL scale continues to expand and the land price continues to increase, the LRR of local government continues to grow. In the process of the “three old transformations” policy, the government’s revenue share was further increased. However, this led to a decreased motivation of rural collectives in implementing “three old transformations”; in 2015, the government reduced the share of proceeds, thus narrowing the LRR.

In the early 1990s, Wujiang began implementing the collective land expropriation policy, a single-track system significantly different from Shunde’s dual-track system. The local government monopolized all the value-added proceeds from SCL concessions, thus having complete LRRs. With the increasing price of land concessions, the LRR was expanded. Before adopting the “three types of optimizations and protection” policy, the local government’s LRRs were at their maximum. The 3 m² reserved construction land per capita policy in the “three types of optimizations and protection” policy has led the local government to transfer part of the revenue to the rural collective, thus reducing the local government’s LRRs. The growth scale of SCL reflects the change in local government land revenue. According to land survey data, the scale of state-owned construction land in both Shunde and Wujiang grew from about 80 km² to about 270 km² from 1992 to 2018, with the fastest growth rate from 2002 to 2010, when Shunde and Wujiang grew by 89.7 km² and 105.80 km², respectively (Figure 5). This reflects the maximization of local government LRRs during this period.

(2) Isomorphic evolution of rural collectives’ revenue rights

The same trend is accompanied by the evolution of the rural collective’s LRR. Prior to the formal land marketization, rural collectives in Shunde and Wujiang had stable LRRs through farmland contracting and leasing industrial buildings.

In terms of Shunde, after the implementation of the shared cooperative system in 1992, the rural collective has expanded its LRRs through various forms of contract payments, industrial building rentals, and land rentals. The rural collective is the only subject of LRRs. With the reform of the land expropriation system and the CCL marketization, the sustainable income of rural collectives was changed into a one-time income, and part of the income from CCL transfer was charged by the local government. The LRRs were thus separated from the rural collectives and declined. Some measures of the “three old transformations” policy have further reduced the LRRs. Shunde’s village collectives have

thus witnessed a shift from the strong rights of a single subject to the relatively weak rights of multiple subjects.

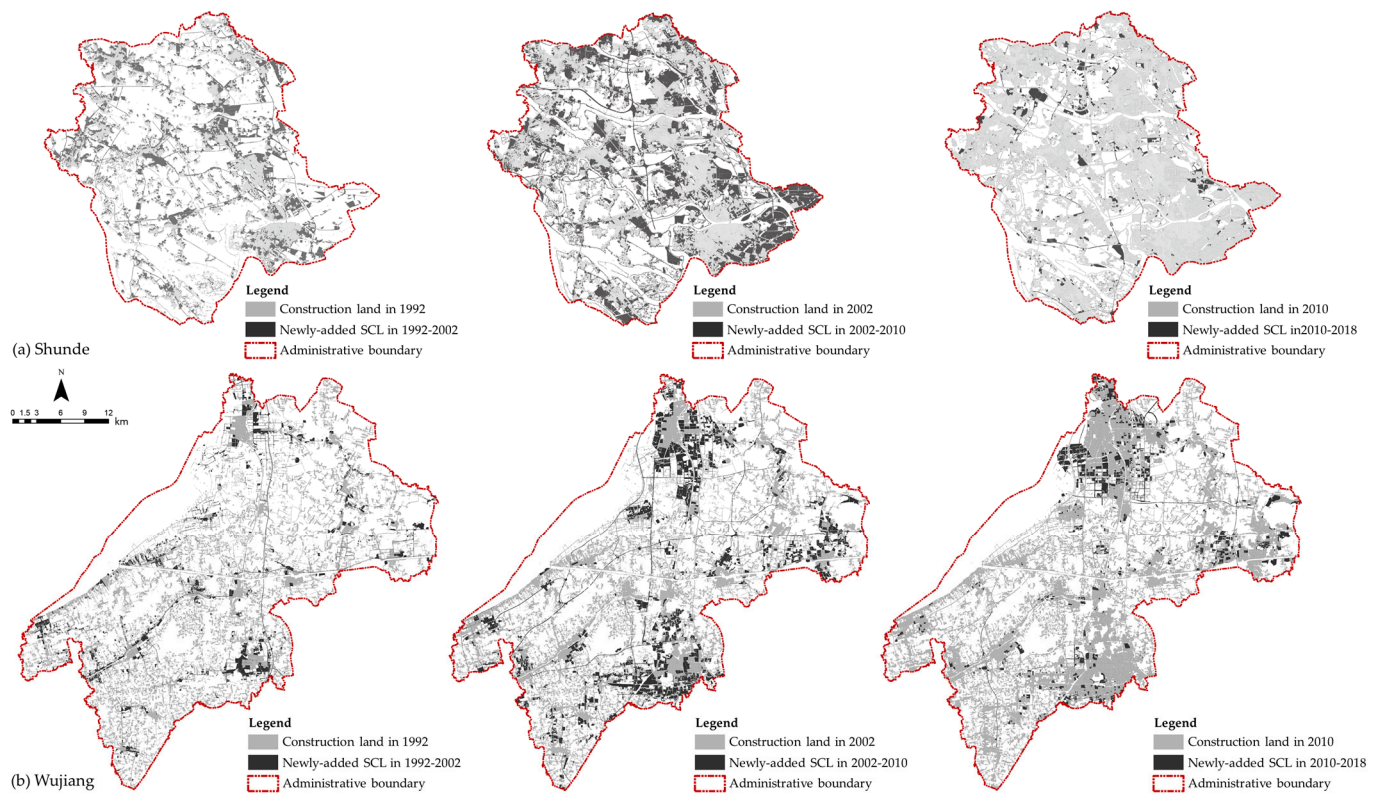


Figure 5. Spatial growth of state-owned construction land of Shunde and Wujiang in 1992–2018. (a). Shunde; (b). Wujiang.

In terms of Wujiang, due to the complete implementation of the collective land expropriation system, the rural collective's LRRs only retained the one-time compensation for land expropriation, and the LRRs were thus minimal. After establishing a shared cooperatives system in 2001, collective asset management was returned to the rural collective economic organizations. However, the collective assets are all stock assets rather than new assets, which cannot expand the value-added income. This means that the collective LRRs of Wujiang rural collectives were fixed during this period. With the introduction of Suzhou's policy of strengthening the collective economy and the "three types of optimizations and protection" policy in 2011, the measurement of stock CCL transformation and the land reservation has expanded the LRRs of rural collectives, thus realizing the shift of LRRs from fixation to promotion. Collective-owned assets may reflect changes in the village's LRRs. According to statistics, collective-owned assets in Shunde L village proliferated since the 1990s, from 205 million to over 4000 million, but stagnated after the stock SCL nationalization in 2010. In contrast, the collective-owned assets of Wujiang T village always hovered around 130 million and grew after 2010 (Figure 6). This coincides with the change in the rural collective's LRRs.

In general, rural collective's LRRs in Shunde and Wujiang jointly move towards equilibrium. Shunde's "bottom-up" rural collective power has been controlled to some extent, while Wujiang has shifted from fixation to promotion. The gap between Shunde's "strong rural collective" and Wujiang's "weak rural collective" has been narrowed. It is important to note that this trend seems to put an end to the Shunde model. In this village, collective assets participate in rural industrialization and tend to follow the Wujiang model of land nationalization. However, rural collectives are willing to transfer their CCL to SCL because, within the framework of land nationalization, they can possess the use rights

of state-owned land using “cash for property”. In contrast, the collective’s use rights are retained and LRRs are even expanded. For Wujiang, the various measures in growing the collective economic organizations and renewing the stock SCL are also consciously expanding the land use rights of collective economic organizations and thus expanding the collective’s LRR. These measures indicate that local governments tend to respect collective property rights and interests. It can be seen that both the Shunde and Wujiang models gradually move toward a balance of interests among local government, rural collectives, and the market through land use rights and land revenue rights. This reveals a trend toward homogenizing property rights in the CCL marketization in Shunde and Wujiang, two regions with different economic development patterns.

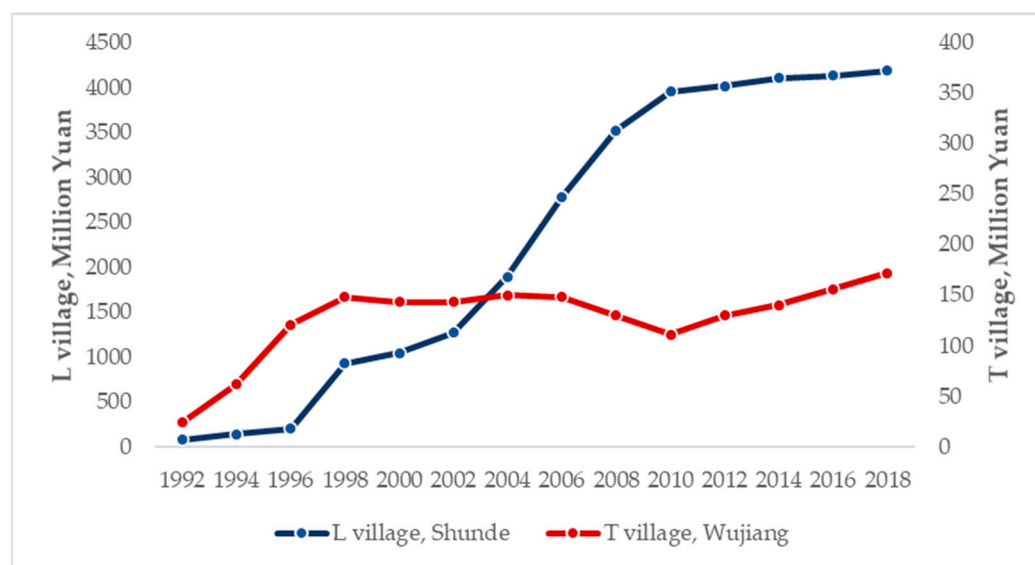


Figure 6. Collective-owned assets changes of L village in Shunde and T village in Wujiang in 1992–2018.

4. Analysis of Impact Mechanisms

4.1. Coercive Isomorphism: Top-Down Authority Pressure

In the context of the large-scale occupation of agricultural land in the 1990s and early 2000s, the central government issued the *Document No. 1* and the *Decision on Deepening Reform and Strengthening Land Management* in 2004, calling for accelerating the reform of the land expropriation system and strictly controlling the disorderly expansion of construction land. The *Decision on Several Major Issues in Promoting Rural Reform and Development* in 2008 formally set out procedures for the CCL use right transfer and clarified the path for agricultural conversion. These policies aimed to regulate the land market, which essentially monopolizes land development rights and restricts the CCL expansion initiated by the rural collective. During this period, Shunde introduced a series of policies such as the *Interim Regulations on the Conversion, Expropriation, Reimbursable Use of Agricultural Land* and the *Implementation Opinions on Promoting the “Three Old Transformation”*, which are concrete manifestations of continuous expansion of the SCL market. This is in line with the central government’s policy. In 2010, Suzhou issued *Opinions on Accelerating the Citizenship of Farmers*. It introduced the policy of “three types of concentrations” and “three types of replacements”, which focused on promoting the replacement of CCL with SCL. This is a specific response to the central government’s policy.

Except for the pilot areas, the central government’s policies have expanded the organizational field, and the organizational behavior within the same field is regulated by convergence to some extent. The seeming “implementation” of central government policies by local governments is in essence a top-down structural adjustment and obedience, thus creating a mandatory convergence.

4.2. Imitative Isomorphism: Sequential Evolution of Horizontal Learning

In the cases of Shunde and Wujiang, imitative learning evolved sequentially rather than simultaneously. In 2001, Suzhou issued the *Implementation Opinions on Actively Exploring the Reform of Rural Land Shared Cooperative System*, implementing the shared cooperative system and introducing the “innovative” model of “three types of cooperatives”⁴. This policy is not an innovation of Suzhou but originated from the early exploration of land shared cooperatives in the Pearl River Delta region in the 1990s. In 1993, Shunde specified four levels of reform experiments in the *Decision on Deepening Rural Reform*, which included rural institutional reform with the rural shared cooperative system. This reform liberated rural labor, released vacant and individual-contracted collective land, and boosted the rural collective economy. In addition, through the shared cooperative reform, the higher-level government has strengthened its control over rural collective assets, intensified its intervention in rural economic and social development, and further advanced rural re-collectivization. This imitative isomorphism achieves a win-win situation for all sides and has relatively wide adaptability. Moreover, Wujiang’s measurement of the reserved development land in the “three types of optimization and protection” policy in 2015 also came from Shunde’s exploration in the early 21st century. This policy was imitated because it guaranteed the land use rights of the expropriated landowners and thus a certain amount of collective assets.

Imitative learning is not a one-way behavior. Shunde’s reform of the land acquisition system in 2001 and the transformation of village industrial parks in 2017 are examples of Shunde’s exploration to promote the efficient use of collective construction land, which is an example of continuous imitative learning from southern Jiangsu.

Imitative pressure is a compromise for local governments to reduce risks and lower innovation costs in the face of dilemmas and future uncertainties [42]. The pressure of institutional competition forces local governments to initiate learning mechanisms and carry out institutional innovation through importation and imitation. This has also advanced the convergence of cross-regional collective construction land reform to some extent.

4.3. Normative Pressure: The Organizational Isomorphism of Governance Embedding

An important reason why rural collectives are willing to convert CCL to SCL in stock construction land regeneration is that collective land reform has enabled the common perception of state-owned land: broader property rights, better credit, and a wide-range market. For rural collectives, if CCL can be converted to SCL to safeguard the collective revenue from being damaged, it is undoubtedly a further expansion of the LRR. This is the common choice under normative cognition.

Moreover, the mutual promotion of collectivization and nationalization in Shunde and Wujiang is not only based on shared perceptions and not only due to the central government’s mandatory regulation of CCL and the imitative learning of two places but, more importantly, the common foundation of the twice collectivization of agricultural land property rights. The first was the “land contracting system”⁵ and the “Three types of farmland system”⁶ implemented by Shunde and Wujiang, respectively, where the land contracting system changed from long-term contracting to short-term contracting, from subcontracting to bid contracting, and from scattered contracting to centralized paid contracting. The “three types of farmland system” divides rural collective land into the grain, feed, and responsibility farmland. Although the practices in the two places are different, the essence of both is to turn the land originally fixed in farmers into the unified disposal of village collectives by property rights upward to realize the large-scale operation of agricultural land. The second is the shared cooperative system. Based on reforming the village committee, shared cooperatives were formed, and the economic groups formerly organized as village teams were incorporated into village shared cooperatives. The twice upward in property rights not only returned the actual control of the land to the rural collective but also led to a function convergence of the collective economic organizations.

The role of collective economic organizations in asset management and rural governance was simultaneously strengthened.

The expansion of the governance field reinforces organizational isomorphism, which reduces the learning and implementation costs of institutional isomorphism. As a result, a gradually converging property structure emerges. It can be concluded that organizational isomorphism under governance embedding is a prerequisite for coercive pressure and imitative learning.

5. Discussion

5.1. Key Findings and Significance of Institutional Isomorphism of CCL Marketization

This paper introduces the institutional isomorphism theory to the study of institutional change in CCL marketization and carries out theoretical arguments for institutional isomorphism based on literature research. On this basis, we select the representative regions of Guangdong Shunde and Jiangsu Wujiang for collective construction land reform, observe the dynamic evolution of their collective construction land systems since the 1990s, empirically prove the trend of isomorphism in the evolutionary process, and explore its influence mechanism.

Firstly, the study found a trend of isomorphism in the reform of CCL marketization in Shunde and Wujiang, with the emergence of ephemeral isomorphism represented by the reform of the shareholding cooperative system and the land reservation system and with coeval isomorphism represented by the regeneration of the stock CCL. Behind the policy isomorphism, local governments, village collectives, and the market are gradually moving towards equilibrium in terms of land ownership, use rights, and revenue rights. This is in line with Chen's [14] findings on the stage characteristics of collective construction land reform and has some similarities with the symbiotic evolution proposed by Feng [15]. However, the above-mentioned studies emphasize regular evolution and gradual adjustment, which are still essentially path-dependent perspectives under a static perspective. However, this study further analyses the coeval and ephemeral isomorphism in the process of marketisation of collective construction land from a dynamic perspective, expanding the research perspective on the institutional isomorphism of CCL marketization and developing new findings on this basis, which are important for a deeper understanding of the market reform history of CCL in China.

Secondly, in the analysis regarding pressure mechanisms, it was found that the tendency towards isomorphism was influenced by a combination of top-down coercive pressures, imitative learning between peer governments, and normative governance systems. It is in line with the studies of Ho [28] and Zheng [49], which point to authoritarian pressures, transmitted pressure from the central to provincial departments and imitative learning between governments. On this basis, this study finds that a normative governance system plays a key role in the policy isomorphism for the CCL marketization in different regions, which is an outgrowth of China's unified training system for government officials, a system that leads them to choose similar solution paths when faced with similar problems. This provides an explanatory framework for the convergence in the evolution of collective land systems in different regions of China.

5.2. The Bi-Directional Oscillation of CCL Institutional Change

It is undeniable that in the process of institutional innovation, there are lock-in effects and path dependence of institutional changes, and not every convergent policy experiment has been effectively implemented. In the early 1990s, while promoting the reform of the rural economy in southern Jiangsu, private enterprises and an export-oriented economy were encouraged, and industrial parks were built on state-owned construction land, thus creating a "new southern Jiangsu model". This model has been praised as a successful model that integrates economic development and environmental protection and has been followed by many regions. At the beginning of the 21st century, when the rural industrial parks were blooming everywhere and when the resource carrying capacity was decreasing,

Shunde also proposed the idea of developing intensive industrial parks by learning from the southern Jiangsu model and implementing centralized and continuous development of industrial land. However, according to statistics, the scale of newly added CCL in Shunde from 2001 to 2009 exceeded 35 km² (Table 1). Obviously, the scale of CCL has not been controlled, and the nationalized intensive industrial zone construction has not achieved the expected results.

Table 1. The scale of collective-owned construction land in Shunde and Wujiang from 1992–2018.

	1992	2001	2009	2018
CCL scale of Shunde (km ²)	36.66	82.34	117.79	158.35
CCL scale of Wujiang (km ²)	85.57	94.09	105.80	107.57

Similarly, Wujiang launched the *Measures on the Management of the Transfer of the Use Right of Rural Stock Collective Construction Land* and the *Opinions on Revitalizing the City's Stock Construction Land* in 1996, starting the experiment of stock CCL transfer reform and exploring ways to transfer CCL with compensation and a limited period, which are similar to those in the Pearl River Delta region in terms of scope, objects, and allocation ratio. However, the statistics of construction land projects show that the policy has yet to be implemented.

As can be seen, multiple pulling factors of institutional diversity still exist during the convergence in both places. These pulls come from initial socio-economic conditions, historical blocs, the way interest groups gaming, the forms of public decision-making, and the institutional innovation pressure of local governments, which shape the bi-directional oscillation of institutional evolution together with coercive, imitative, and normative push factors (Figure 7).

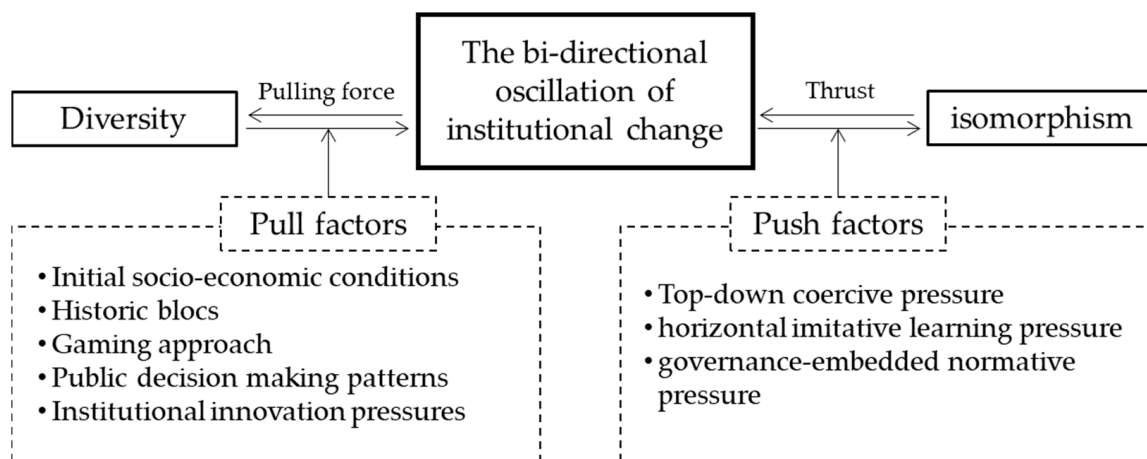


Figure 7. Schematic diagram of the bi-directional oscillation of institutional change.

5.3. How to Treat the Isomorphic Trend of CCL Reform

Institutional innovation is an important source of economic vitality, which is one of the successful experiences of China's reform and opening up for more than 40 years. While advances in technology and human cognitive abilities have brought to light an increasingly complex, diverse, and dynamic world of reality, helping people to understand it in its diversity, they have also given rise to a vision of a unitary world. Existing research and debates on collective land reform theories remain under the paradigm of "optimal governance" and "governance panacea," with scholars tending to promote the best solution and a homogenized institutional blueprint, i.e., institutional monocropping. In actual institutional reform, the evolution of institutional diversity requires a combination of several conditions [50,51]. If the conditions favoring the evolution of diversity are rarely satisfied, it is likely to lead to institutional failure and the occurrence of path lock [2,52]. The

underlying reason is often due to the fact that institutional change agents adopt a unitary institutional approach and hardly consider institutional diversity. The system's evolution needs to avoid the inertia of homogenization and the promotion of a theory or measure as a "panacea". A great deal of experimentation in vertical and horizontal management systems should be encouraged, giving more room for diversity.

In addition, according to evolutionary game theory and repeated game theory, there are multiple solutions to the game equilibrium [21]. Any identical regime may produce different results even if put in the same place [6,53]. Therefore, it is evident that a specific identical institution will produce different results in different regions. The central government should further consider policy flexibility to allow local adaptability when formulating uniform policies, avoiding rigidity leading to mandatory isomorphic tendencies, and stifling the vitality of local diversification.

6. Conclusions

This paper introduces institutional isomorphism theory, constructs a hypothesis of isomorphism in the CCL marketization reform, and selects two representative regions, Shunde in Guangdong province and Wujiang in Jiangsu province, to review the dynamic evolution of CCL marketization in the two areas since the 1990s. The policy convergence and property rights convergence of the local experiment is identified, and the influence mechanism of institutional isomorphism is analyzed.

This paper argues that Shunde and Wujiang chose their distinctive and differentiated development paths at the beginning of CCL marketization. However, in the evolutionary process of more than 30 years, there emerged the isomorphic evolution trend, especially the ephemeral isomorphism represented by the reform of the shared cooperative system and the land reservation system and the coeval isomorphism represented by the renewal of the stock of collective construction land. Behind the policy convergence, local governments, rural collectives, and the market are gradually moving towards a balance in land ownership, use rights, and revenue rights. Top-down coercive pressures, imitative pressures for horizontal learning, and normative pressures for governance embeddedness shape the convergent character of CCL reform, which constitute a dual-side mechanism for institutional change together with the pull of diversity.

This paper has some limitations for further improvement. First, this paper mainly observes policy evolution based on two representative regions in the past three decades. The performance of land policy is revealed in both spatial and economic performance, and the multidimensional performance assessment can be an essential basis for policy evaluation. Second, the temporal scope covered in this paper is only a tiny fragment of a long history. The economic and social backgrounds of the two places are very different, and even if there is a trend of isomorphism at a certain point in time, it cannot be denied that they have been exploring differently for a long time in their actual situations. This path dependence was not formed overnight. This paper wishes to emphasize that more chances should be allowed for diversified exploration to avoid losing the opportunity to seek the most locally appropriate policy solutions under multiple pressures.

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Notes

- ¹ In 2014, the Department of Land and Resources of Jiangsu Province issued the Work Plan for ‘Double Upgrading’ for Land Saving and Intensive Land Use in Jiangsu Province, and the Implementing Plan for the ‘Three Types of Optimizations and Protection’ Action of Suzhou. These can better protect resources, more strongly secure development, and more effectively protect rights and interests by optimizing the structural layout of agricultural land, the spatial structure of construction land, and the land layout of residential land in towns and villages.
- ² The “three old transformations” refers to the unique mode of the stock of construction land regeneration in Guangdong Province, which is the transformations of old towns, old factories, and old villages.
- ³ In the policy of “three types of concentrations” and “three types of replacements”, the “three types of concentrations” policy refers to the concentration of farming households in communities, contracted agricultural land in large-scale management, and industrial enterprises in parks. The “three types of replacements” refer to the replacement of collective asset ownership rights with shares in community cooperatives, the replacement of land contracting and management rights with basic social security, and the replacement of homestead use rights with urban housing or with industrial buildings for secondary and tertiary industries, or with shares in community cooperatives.
- ⁴ The “three types of cooperatives” refers to the three shared cooperatives implemented in southern Jiangsu. It includes land shared cooperatives, community shared cooperatives, and professional shared cooperatives for agricultural land management, collective management assets, and professional assets of grain and oil.
- ⁵ Shunde started to deepen the reform of the contracting responsibility system in 1989, such as replacing collective free subcontracting with centralized paid contracting, changing long-term contracting to short-term one, subcontracting to bid contracting, and scattered contracting to tract one. The village collective has taken back the farmland contracted by the farmers and conducted bidding in the village. The village collective sub-rented the land to contract farmers, charged the contract rent, and then allocated the contract rent to the rural collective members or public welfare undertaken by the village collective, including paying social insurance scheme for the farmers.
- ⁶ The existing literature review on land-moderate-scale management can be traced back to the ‘two types of farmland system’, Pingdu, Shandong Province. This system includes grain farmland distributed to farmers and responsibility farmland used for land-at-scale management. The ‘three types of farmland system’ introduced in this article has more feed farmland than the ‘two types of farmland system’, and there are no fundamental differences as grain and feed farmland have been distributed to farmers.

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