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Research on the Interaction Mechanism between Land System Reform and Rural Population Flow: Europe (Taking Spain as an Example) and China

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Abstract: This paper examines the interaction between land policies and rural labor migration in China and Europe, highlighting how land reforms guide labor mobility and their impacts on land and social structures. In China, the Household Contract Responsibility System and land transfer policies have facilitated agricultural scale expansion and the urbanization of the rural labor force. Homestead reforms have further enhanced farmers' asset liquidity. In Europe, using Spain as a case study, EU agricultural policies have spurred agricultural modernization, economic diversification, and intensive land use. These advancements benefitted from a mature land transfer market and increased non-agricultural employment opportunities. Both China and Europe face challenges of population aging and rural depopulation, necessitating improvements in land use efficiency, the balance of the scale, and the protection of farmers' rights and interests. Europe addresses labor shortages through technology, mechanization, and cooperatives, while China employs land trusteeship, transfer platforms, and the "three rights separation" system to combat land abandonment and labor shortages. Future research should strengthen comparative studies between China and Europe, quantify interactive relationships, consider the impact of transnational labor mobility under globalization, explore policy innovations, and foster international cooperation to address demographic changes and agricultural labor shortages. Additionally, promoting sustainable land use and farmers' rights, equalizing urban–rural public services, enhancing education and training, and improving the social security system are crucial for integrated urban–rural development.

Keywords: land system reform; rural population mobility; integrated urban–rural development; agricultural modernization; rural labor migration; land transfer



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1. Introduction

Since China's reform and opening up, its rural land system has undergone profound changes, transitioning from initial collective ownership and unified management to the implementation of the household responsibility system. This shift has significantly boosted agricultural productivity and promoted rapid rural economic development. In the 21st century, the revision of the Rural Land Contract Law of the People's Republic of China and the gradual relaxation of land transfer policies have accelerated the process of agricultural modernization and large-scale farming. Concurrently, the rural labor force has increasingly migrated to urban areas, creating a unique urban–rural population flow pattern [1].

In contrast, the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) aims to improve agricultural competitiveness through environmentally friendly measures, ensure food security, and promote rural prosperity and sustainable development [2]. Since its establishment in 1962, the CAP has undergone several reforms, evolving from a production-oriented approach to one that emphasizes market mechanisms, environmental protection, and rural diversity. As a leading member of the European Union in agricultural output, Spain's

implementation and effectiveness of the CAP provide an illustrative example for European land policy research.

Spain's agricultural sector ranks fourth in Europe and tenth in the world, contributing 9.2% to the country's GDP and playing a vital role in rural employment [3]. The implementation of the CAP in Spain, especially in areas such as Extremadura, is essential for agricultural development and sustainable rural development, with reforms focused on decoupled aid and rural development support [4]. The CAP's direct aid and market measures have played an important role in stabilizing and promoting agriculture in Spain, while the Rural Development Programmed has contributed to modernization, economic diversification, and environmental protection through various national and local initiatives, providing valuable models for the study of land policy and rural development within the EU [5–7].

Between 2014 and 2020, Spain's National Rural Development Framework and Plan demonstrated a systematic layout and substantial financial investment in rural development at the national level. This included not only direct agricultural support but also significant investments in rural infrastructure, environmental improvements, and agricultural innovation. These efforts have had a direct impact on the employment and migration decisions of the rural population.

Regarding the agricultural labor force and gender structure, in 2016, more than 820,000 people were employed in Spain's agri-food sector, accounting for 9.3% of total employment, with women representing about 30%. This highlights agriculture as an important employment sector and reflects the labor structure's characteristics, essential for analyzing labor mobility trends, gender disparities, and their responses to land policies [8]. In 2019, Spain exported nearly 49 billion euros worth of agricultural products, underscoring its significant role in the global agricultural market. The active trade in agricultural products not only influences the structure of the agricultural economy but also indirectly affects rural employment opportunities and income levels, further impacting migration patterns and decisions [9].

In 2019, Spain received a total of 6.8 billion euros from the CAP. The allocation of these funds to direct aid, market measures, and rural development is directly linked to the sustainability of agriculture, the security of farmers' incomes, and the integrated development of rural areas. These factors are crucial in affecting rural population mobility and land use patterns. Given Spain's prominent position in European agriculture, the depth and breadth of its policy implementation, and its contribution to the global agricultural market, Spanish case studies provide a valuable empirical basis for exploring the interaction between land policy and rural population movement, offering a valuable perspective for a comparative analysis of cross-regional policies.

However, in both China and Europe, there is a complex interaction between land systems and rural migration. Adjustments in land policies, such as the promotion of land transfer rights, influence farmers' migration decisions by providing non-agricultural employment options while creating uncertainty about land use rights [10,11]. The outflow of rural labor has exacerbated problems such as land abandonment and an aging agricultural labor force, prompting the need for further land reform [12]. Understanding the dynamic impact mechanisms between land system reform and rural population mobility is crucial for countries such as China and the European Union to guide policy adjustments to effectively address the challenges of agricultural modernization and changes in rural social structures [13]. Therefore, it is important to explore the dynamic influence mechanism between land reform and rural population movement, not only for a large developing country like China but also for understanding how the EU and its member states can respond to the challenges of agricultural modernization and changes in rural social structure through policy adjustments.

By comparing and analyzing the interaction mechanism between land policy adjustments and rural labor mobility in China and Europe (with Spain as a case study), this study aims to fill the gap in cross-country comparative analyses in this field and provide a new perspective on agricultural labor mobility in the context of globalization.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Status at Home and Abroad

2.1. History of China's Land System Reform

Table 1 summarizes the main processes and content of China's rural land system reform since 1949, reflecting the trajectory of the land system's evolution from feudal ownership to socialist public ownership and then to market-oriented reform, and its significant impact on rural social and economic development.

Table 1. The main reform nodes of China's rural land system and its core contents.

Time Period	Major Content of Land System Reform
1949–Early 1950s	Land Reform: Abolition of the feudal landlord ownership system, establishment of farmers' land ownership
Mid-1950s–Late 1970s	Agricultural Cooperation and Collectivization: Transition from private to collective land ownership, socialist transformation
Late 1978–Early 1980s	Establishment of the Household Contract Responsibility System: Land contracted to households; long-term use rights guaranteed
Late 1980s–1990s	Emergence of Land Transfer Policy: Initial exploration of the transfer of use rights
1990s–Early-21st Century	Implementation of Land Transfer Policy: Legal transfer of rights, promotion of large-scale operations
Early-21st Century–Present	Homestead System Reform: Pilot of the separation of three rights, transfer of use rights and compensated exit

Source of the table: The author drew his own drawing with reference to the following documents: 1950 Land Reform Law of the People's Republic of China, 1953 Resolution on the Development of Agricultural Production Cooperatives, 1981 Several Issues of the CPC Central Committee on Further Strengthening and Improving the Agricultural Production Responsibility System, and 2002 Rural Land Contracting Law of the People's Republic of China.

From 1949 to the Early 1950s: Agrarian Reform. The core of this phase was the abolition of feudal landlord ownership, the redistribution of land to peasants, and the realization of peasant ownership of the land [14]. This reform completely changed the old phenomenon of unequal land ownership, greatly stimulated peasants' enthusiasm for production, laid the foundation for subsequent economic development, and provided the preconditions for the stability of the rural labor force.

From the Mid-1950s to the Late 1970s: Agricultural Cooperatives and Collectivization. With the deepening of socialist transformation, private ownership of land was replaced by collective ownership, and production in the countryside was carried out through co-operatives and people's communes, making land collective property [15]. This change strengthened the centralized management of agriculture and large-scale production but simultaneously limited individual property rights and farmers' production enthusiasm.

From the Late 1970s to the Early 1980s: Establishment of the Household Responsibility System. The reform and opening up of rural China led to the establishment of the household responsibility system, which contracted land to farmers and granted long-term use rights, realizing the initial separation of ownership and use rights [16]. This system greatly improved agricultural production efficiency and peasant incomes, stimulated the rural economy's vitality, and prompted some rural surplus labor to seek non-agricultural employment opportunities, providing an initial impetus for rural-to-urban migration.

From the Late 1980s to the 1990s: Birth of the Land Circulation Policy. During this stage, China began to explore the circulation of land use rights, allowing farmers to transfer land contract management rights while maintaining collective land ownership. This provided the possibility for moderately large-scale agricultural operations and the further mobility of rural labor [16].

From the 1990s to the Early-21st Century: Implementation of the Land Circulation Policy. With the establishment of the market economy system, the land circulation policy was further implemented, and the circulation of land use rights became a legal right. This promoted the optimal allocation of land resources and the large-scale, modern operation of agriculture. Consequently, the scale and speed of rural labor migration accelerated, with many farmers moving to cities to seek non-agricultural job opportunities.

From the Early-21st Century to the Present: Reform of the Homestead System. Entering the new century, China's rural land reform focus shifted to the homestead. Through the

institutional innovation of “three rights separation” (ownership, qualification right, and use right), the circulation of homestead use rights and paid withdrawal were allowed. This not only activated dormant assets in the countryside and increased farmers’ property income but also provided an economic foundation for farmers to settle in cities, promoting integrated urban–rural development and significantly impacting rural population flow. It offered farmers more options for migration and development [17]. Pilot areas have experimented with transferring homestead use rights to address idle rural homesteads, benefiting farmers and various entities [18]. However, challenges remain, such as the unclear subject of homestead use rights and limited circulation. Reforms must be carried out to clearly define rights holders and relax transfer restrictions [19,20]. Understanding farmers’ homestead transfer intentions is crucial, as factors such as risk perception and control can influence their decision-making [21]. Legal dilemmas, such as incomplete usufruct and ownership, need to be addressed to strengthen the legislative transformation of reform policies.

2.2. History of Land System Reform in Europe (Spain)

Since its establishment in 1962, the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has served as the central policy framework for promoting agriculture, ensuring food security, and safeguarding farmers’ well-being in Europe [22]. Table 2 presents the key timelines of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) since its inception in 1962 and its impact on Spain’s agriculture and rural development. It also highlights the differences and implications between China and Europe (using Spain as an example) regarding the interaction mechanism between land reform and rural population mobility.

Table 2. Timeline of land change and agricultural policy in Europe (Spain).

Time Point	Event Overview
1962	CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) officially came into effect, aiming to improve agricultural production efficiency, ensure food security, and stabilize farmers’ income.
1986	Spain joined the EU and began implementing CAP, focusing on agricultural modernization and productivity improvement.
1992 (MacSharry Reform)	First major adjustment of CAP, shifting towards market orientation, reducing price interventions, introducing direct payments to farmers, and initiating environmental protection measures.
2003 (Fischler Reform)	Continued reduction of price support, increased investment in rural development programs, and strengthened sustainability and environmental requirements.
2013	Further reduction of direct payments, introduction of the “green payment” mechanism requiring environmental measures, and enhanced support for rural development and agricultural innovation.
2022 and beyond	The latest CAP framework focuses on climate action, environmental protection, and sustainability, promoting precision agriculture and digital transformation, ensuring fair competition, safeguarding farmers’ income, and adapting to new agricultural challenges.
1990s	Spain utilized CAP funds to upgrade agricultural infrastructure, improve the quality of agricultural products, promote agricultural diversification and rural tourism development, and balance agricultural structure.
Recent years	Spain actively responded to EU green initiatives, strengthening water resource management, biodiversity protection, and organic agriculture; exploring a balanced path between land consolidation and smallholder rights protection; and promoting sustainable agricultural development.

Table source: The author draws his own combing based on the above time nodes and event overview, based on an in-depth study of the historical evolution of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the implementation of Spain’s agricultural policy, and its impact on rural development.

In 1962: Birth of CAP. The introduction of the CAP marked a major turning point in European agricultural policy, aiming to lay the foundation for agricultural modernization by improving production efficiency, food security, and farmers’ incomes. This contrasted sharply with the agricultural collectivization and cooperative movement that China was experiencing during the same period, illustrating two divergent paths of agricultural development.

In 1986 and Subsequent CAP Reforms. Following Spain’s accession to the European Union, the implementation of the CAP facilitated the transformation of Spanish agriculture from traditional to modern. This involved reducing government price intervention and

increasing direct payment subsidies, which is comparable to China's land contract responsibility system and the gradual relaxation of land transfer policies. Both aimed to improve agricultural efficiency and farmers' incomes while creating conditions for the transfer of rural labor to non-agricultural sectors.

From the 1990s to the Early-21st Century. During this period, Spain utilized CAP funds to enhance infrastructure, improve the quality of agricultural products, and develop agricultural diversification and rural tourism. These efforts are analogous to China's reform of the homestead system and the development of the land transfer market, both of which explore pathways to the diversification and sustainable development of the rural economy.

In 2022 and Beyond. The latest round of CAP reform places greater emphasis on climate change, environmental protection, and agricultural sustainability. It promotes precision agriculture and digital transformation, echoing the common challenges faced by global agriculture and highlighting the direction China must also consider in its agricultural modernization efforts, particularly in land use efficiency, ecological protection, and the safeguarding of smallholder farmers' rights and interests.

Through this comparison, we observe the similarities and differences between China and Europe in land systems and agricultural policies and how these policies influence rural population mobility and social structure changes. Spain's experience offers valuable lessons on balancing land concentration with the rights of smallholder farmers and addressing issues such as population aging and rural depopulation through policy innovation and international cooperation. For China, these examples present both learning opportunities and avenues for cooperation, especially in promoting sustainable agricultural practices, protecting farmers' rights, and integrating urban and rural development.

2.3. Analysis from the Perspective of New Institutional Economics

The property rights theory within the framework of new institutional economics offers an in-depth analysis of the impact mechanisms of land system reforms on rural population mobility in China and Europe [23]. Central to Coase's theorem is the notion that clearly defined property rights and low transaction costs can drive optimal resource allocation, irrespective of the initial allocation of property rights [24]. Applied to land systems, this principle implies that the clarity and liquidity of property rights are crucial in determining farmers' investment behaviors and migration decisions. In China, strengthening the stability of land contract management rights and the transfer mechanism incentivizes farmers to make long-term investments in the land. It also provides avenues for transferring land when seeking non-agricultural job opportunities, thereby reducing the psychological and economic burdens of migration. In contrast, in Europe, particularly in EU countries, the clear definition of property rights and mature land transfer markets allow farmers to flexibly adjust their land assets, promoting labor mobility and the transition towards intensive and specialized agriculture. The differences between the two regions in land ownership, the allocation of use rights, and transfer mechanisms profoundly affect farmers' land use strategies and the patterns of rural labor mobility.

Transaction cost theory examines the costs of economic activities beyond direct production costs, including information searching, negotiation, and contract enforcement. In the context of land system reform, reducing the transaction costs of rural labor migration is key. For instance, simplifying land transfer procedures, establishing information exchange platforms, and providing legal advisory services can effectively reduce the cost burden on farmers, thereby enhancing their willingness to migrate [25]. Additionally, a robust social security system that ensures the portability of pension and health insurance across regions is an essential aspect of alleviating migration barriers. By advancing land rights confirmation and establishing transfer platforms, China has partially reduced transaction costs, though issues such as information asymmetry and inadequate legal protection remain prominent [26]. In contrast, Europe, with its comprehensive legal system and market mechanisms, generally has lower transaction costs. However, continuously optimizing processes, enhancing transparency, and protecting smallholders' rights remain significant challenges.

In the theory of property rights, Table 3 illustrates how the relevant laws of Spain and China shape their respective land systems. Spain has standardized the assessment of land value through the 2011 Land Law Valuation Regulation, which provides transparency and efficiency for the land market. Additionally, its long-established Civil Code guarantees property rights, promoting the flexible adjustment of land resources and the free movement of labor. In contrast, China has developed a market-oriented land valuation system based on the Land Management Law and other statutes. The implementation of the Civil Code has further strengthened the protection and circulation mechanisms of land use rights, encouraging farmers to pursue non-agricultural employment opportunities while retaining land rights and promoting the orderly flow of the population to cities.

Table 3. China and EU (Spain) Law on Agriculture and Land.

Country	Spain	China
Land Valuation Regulations	Royal Decree No. 1492/2011 of 24 October 2011, which approves the Regulations for the Valuation of Land Law. This decree regulates the procedures and standards for land value assessment, providing a unified basis for land transactions, taxation, and planning within Spain.	“Land Administration Law of the People’s Republic of China” (enacted in 1986, with multiple revisions) and the “Interim Regulations on the Assignment and Transfer of the Right to Use State-owned Land in Urban Areas” (1990), among other legal documents, provide the basic legal framework for land valuation. Land valuation in China generally follows the market value principle, considering factors such as land location, usage, and development potential.
Legal Basis of Property Rights	The Civil Code, promulgated on 24 July 1889 (published on 25 July 1889, No. 206, effective date: 16 August 1889). Spain’s Civil Code establishes the basic principles of private property rights, including property ownership, usage rights, and other property rights systems.	The Civil Code of the People’s Republic of China (adopted on 28 May 2020, effective 1 January 2021) replaces the previous “Property Law of the People’s Republic of China,” among others, comprehensively stipulating property rights, including land use rights, ownership, and other property rights systems. The Civil Code emphasizes equal protection of property rights and sets out rules for the acquisition, transfer, and mortgage of land use rights.
Characteristics	Spain: Emphasizes the standardization and systematization of land valuation. The Royal Decree directly intervenes in the valuation process to ensure fairness and transparency. The property rights system has a long history, centered around the Civil Code, reflecting the characteristics of the civil law system.	China: Emphasizes the market-oriented operation of land use rights. The valuation system is closely related to the land market. In recent legal reforms, the protection of property rights has been gradually strengthened, particularly with the introduction of the Civil Code, marking the further maturity and perfection of China’s civil legal system.

Source of the table: The author has drawn his own drawing based on the following: Royal Decree No. 1492/2011 of 24 October 2011: Land Law Valuation Regulations, Civil Code promulgated on 24 July 1889, Land Administration Law of the People’s Republic of China, 1990 Interim Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on the Assignment and Transfer of Urban Land Use Rights, 2020 Civil Code of the People’s Republic of China.

The different approaches of the two countries in defining property rights, market mechanisms, and legal guarantees underscore the crucial role of land system reform in promoting rural population mobility, optimizing resource allocation, and supporting economic development. These differences also highlight the key value of institutional innovation in responding to the evolving needs of urban and rural changes.

2.4. Analysis from the Perspective of Development Economics Theory

Within the framework of development economics, the binary economic model, particularly the Lewis model and the Todaro model, provides a theoretical basis for understanding the macro-dynamic mechanisms of rural labor mobility. The Lewis model emphasizes the unrestricted supply of surplus agricultural labor to the urban industrial sector, a process accelerated by land system reform [25]. The clear definition of land use rights and the enhancement of the circulation mechanism can release agricultural labor, facilitating its transfer to the more productive non-agricultural sector, thereby promoting the orderly flow of rural labor. The Todaro model further considers the impact of expected income disparities on rural labor migration decisions and illustrates how changes in the land system can guide labor mobility by influencing rural income expectations. In the context of the different stages of development in China and Europe, the speed and nature of this

transfer process are significantly affected by the intensity of land system reform, the level of agricultural modernization, and the development speed of non-agricultural industries.

Combined with the theory of sustainable development, land system reform should not only enhance the economic efficiency of agricultural production but also consider environmental protection and social welfare. In Central and Eastern Europe, land systems should encourage sustainable agricultural practices, such as agroecology and conservation tillage, while preventing overexploitation and environmental degradation through rational land use planning [27]. Land policies need to balance urban and rural development, ensuring that the rational allocation of land resources meets urban development needs while securing ecological safety and quality of life in rural areas. Rural labor mobility is closely linked to the balance of urban and rural development. A reasonable land system can guide the rational distribution of labor between urban and rural areas, promote the integrated development of these areas, prevent the phenomenon of “hollow villages”, and enhance the attractiveness of rural regions. Additionally, it can create more non-agricultural employment opportunities through agricultural modernization [28].

2.5. Research Status at Home and Abroad

European Perspective

From a European perspective, the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) serves as a crucial policy framework guiding the agricultural development of EU member states. It has far-reaching impacts on rural development, particularly in terms of agricultural subsidies, structural changes in agriculture, rural labor mobility, and land policy adjustments. The following is a detailed elaboration of these impacts:

Agricultural Subsidies and Farmer Decision-Making

The CAP has significantly influenced the production decisions and income levels of European farmers through direct payments and market interventions. According to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Chapter III, in the field of agriculture and fisheries, Article 18 outlines the necessity for the Union to develop and implement a common agricultural and fishery policy covering agriculture, fisheries, and trade in agricultural products. The policy aims to promote the circulation and rational development of these products by expanding the internal market. The definition of this policy also includes the specificities of fisheries, ensuring that the use of the term “agriculture” broadly covers the fishery sector. Unless otherwise provided in Articles 39 to 44, the rules established for the internal market also apply to agricultural products. The operation of the internal market for agricultural products should complement the promotion of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Article 39 of the CAP clearly identifies several key objectives, including increasing agricultural productivity through technological innovation, ensuring a reasonable standard of living for farmers, stabilizing the market, ensuring an adequate supply, and maintaining reasonable consumer prices. The development and implementation of the CAP must consider the unique nature of agriculture, which is influenced by social structures and natural differences between regions. This requires gradual adjustments and adaptations, recognizing the close links and importance of agriculture to the overall economies of member countries.

In this context, agricultural subsidies have had a significant impact on the decision-making and income status of European farmers through direct payments and market interventions. The direct payment mechanism provides farmers with income stability and mitigates the risks posed by market price fluctuations, which, in turn, promotes agricultural production [29]. However, this has also led to discussions about the efficiency and equity of subsidies. Some studies suggest that subsidies may cause farmers to be slower in responding to market signals, influence optimal crop structures and production methods, and sometimes promote resource-intensive agriculture without adequate consideration of environmental sustainability. Successive CAP reforms, notably the MacSharry reform in 1992 and the Fischler reform in 2003, have gradually reduced support for agricultural

prices in favor of direct payment subsidies to promote agricultural restructuring [30]. These reforms have encouraged the expansion and specialization of agriculture and the development of large farms but have also raised concerns about the viability of small farmers. After the accession of Eastern European countries to the EU, the phenomenon of land concentration has intensified. Large farms have easier access to CAP financial support due to their economies of scale, while small farmers face greater market competition pressures due to their smaller scale and lower production efficiency, challenging their survival.

Rural Labor Transfer

CAP reform and the adjustment of agricultural structures have had a complex impact on rural labor mobility. On one hand, agricultural modernization and large-scale operations have reduced the demand for labor, prompting many rural laborers to move to the non-agricultural sector or to cities in search of better employment opportunities, thus accelerating urban–rural integration. On the other hand, land policy adjustments, such as encouraging land circulation and concentration, may lead to the loss of land by some smallholder farmers, further contributing to rural outflow [31]. However, labor outflow can also provide opportunities for remaining farmers to expand their operations and promote the modernization of agriculture.

Analysis of the Correlation between Land Policy Adjustment and Labor Mobility

The adjustment of land policy, particularly the redefinition of land tenure and the innovation of circulation mechanisms, plays a dual role as both a driver of rural labor migration and a consequence of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the European Agricultural Security Fund (EAGF), and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) [32]. The CAP strategic plan aims to promote the intensification and modernization of agriculture to improve efficiency, thereby contributing to the migration of rural populations to non-agricultural areas [33]. When small-scale farmers experience land loss or rising agricultural costs, they are more likely to abandon agricultural livelihoods in favor of urban employment opportunities. This process exacerbates the outflow of rural labor and indirectly promotes the expansion of agricultural operations, accelerating the trend of land concentration.

This circular interaction mechanism reveals the intrinsic relationship between land policy and rural labor mobility, highlighting the complex relationship between the two. It requires policymakers to carefully balance the security of farmers' livelihoods, land rights, and the stability of the rural social structure while promoting agricultural modernization and improving production efficiency. This means that the adjustment of land policies should not be carried out in isolation but should be closely integrated with the dynamics of the rural labor market, improvements in social security systems, and the diversification of the rural economy, ensuring the sustainable transformation and harmonious development of rural areas in line with the overall objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly commitments to eradicate poverty and promote economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

China's Experience

As a landmark policy innovation during China's reform and opening-up period, the household contract responsibility system not only reshaped the organizational form of agricultural production but also significantly stimulated farmers' production vitality, improving agricultural output and efficiency [34]. This system was formally established through a series of documents, such as the Circular of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Issues Concerning Further Strengthening and Improving the Responsibility System for Agricultural Production (1981). It devolved land use rights from collective ownership to individual peasant households, breaking the previous collective labor model, giving peasants direct control and management rights over land, and promoting significant increases in the income and diversification of agricultural production.

The core of this system lies in the “separation of powers”, where land ownership belongs to the collective and the right to contract management belongs to peasant households. This effectively combines the collective advantages of public ownership with individual incentive mechanisms, providing strong impetus for the rapid recovery and development of the agricultural economy. Scholar Miao Degang (2019) [35] further noted that the successful implementation of the household contract responsibility system not only directly promoted agricultural output at the time but also laid a solid institutional foundation for subsequent land transfer policies and large-scale rural labor flows, initiating the first wave of market-oriented reform of the rural economy.

With China’s rapid economic development and accelerated urbanization, the land circulation policy has become key to regulating rural land resources and promoting large-scale agricultural operations. The policy encourages the transfer of land contract management rights through various forms such as subcontracting, leasing, swapping, and voluntary transfer among farmers, creating conditions for agricultural intensification and modernization. Studies indicate that while land transfer improves agricultural productivity, it is also accompanied by issues of land concentration and the protection of small farmers’ interests, necessitating a balance between scale and the survival of small farmers [36].

The core of China’s homestead reform is to optimize the allocation of rural homestead resources and improve farmers’ property returns through reasonable institutional innovation, as highlighted in a 2020 study by Daniel Zhang, Zhou Li, and Jia Wei [37]. The reform measures mainly focus on exploring paid exit mechanisms and the transfer of use rights for homesteads. These reforms aim to activate the homestead market, providing necessary economic support for farmers willing to settle in cities and responding to the development trend of urban–rural integration. According to the Land Management Law of the People’s Republic of China, homestead reform promotes integrated urban–rural development and improves the quality of the rural living environment. However, it must also carefully consider the fairness of the distribution of land rights and interests to avoid social contradictions.

Simultaneously, the phenomenon of “hollow villages” has become increasingly pronounced with the large-scale migration of rural labor to cities, leading to land abandonment [38]. The issue of land use rights for migrant farmers has become a key consideration for whether they choose to return to their hometowns for development. Under this flow model, on one hand, the problem of land abandonment has driven the demand for land circulation, accelerating the transformation towards large-scale agricultural operations. On the other hand, the demand for land by returning migrant workers has promoted agricultural diversification and injected human resources and innovation vitality into rural revitalization. Therefore, the key to policy formulation lies in how the Rural Land Contract Law of the People’s Republic of China ensures that migrant farmers’ land rights and interests are protected while encouraging them to return to their hometowns to start businesses, realizing the positive interaction between population flow and land use.

Policy Adjustment and Rural Rejuvenation

In recent years, the Chinese government has actively promoted policy innovation aimed at diversifying the rural economy and comprehensively revitalizing rural society by optimizing the land system, supporting returning migrant workers in using land resources to start businesses, and developing new agricultural formats, such as rural tourism and family farms. Studies emphasize that policy adjustment needs to comprehensively consider factors such as market demand, farmers’ wishes, and environmental protection to achieve a win–win situation of economic and social benefits [39].

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Empirical Analysis

This study adopted a comprehensive empirical approach to analyze the impact of land system reform on rural population mobility in Central Europe, drawing upon case studies from China and Spain. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of property rights

and transaction costs from the perspective of new institutional economics, the analysis compared the differences in land ownership, use rights allocation, and circulation mechanisms between the two countries. It elucidated how land policies significantly influence farmers' investment choices and migration patterns, thereby affecting regional economic and social development.

The empirical analysis includes a detailed study of historical trends in China's rural population from 1960 to 2020, as shown in (Figure 1) For this topic we present a comparative analysis of agricultural and land-related legislation in China and Spain. Agricultural policies and land valuation regulations in both countries are scrutinized to assess their specific impact on rural labor mobility. The study delves into China's household contract responsibility system and land transfer policies, as well as Spain's agricultural modernization under the influence of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The study makes recommendations to optimize the policies, including the establishment of a platform for exchanging land policies between China and Europe, improving the distribution of land rights, and promoting integrated urban-rural development.

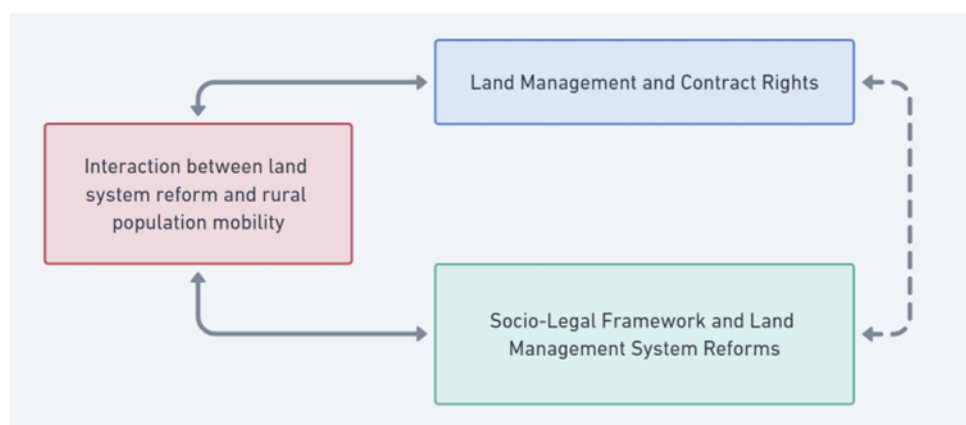


Figure 1. A schematic diagram of the interaction between land system reform and rural mobility. Author's own drawing.

The investigation into the circulation of land management and contract rights employed distinct methodologies tailored to the unique informational landscapes of Spain and China. For China, a thorough documentary review of policies and regulations since 1978 was conducted, evaluating the effects of rights confirmation, certificate issuance, and the establishment of circulation markets on rural income and labor mobility. In Spain, Eurostat data were analyzed qualitatively to assess how the flexibility in adjusting land resource allocation through sales and leases influences income diversification and labor mobility.

The study also explored the conversion of rural assets into working capital, focusing on the transfer of land use rights in China and the implications of land abandonment and increased territorial multifunctionality in Europe. Key indicators such as the proportion of the rural population, age structure, migration patterns, and labor force participation rates were analyzed to provide a solid foundation for understanding the dynamics of rural–urban migration and its socioeconomic consequences.

3.2. Data Visualization

Data visualization played a pivotal role in enhancing the comprehension and persuasive power of the study. Well-designed charts and graphs, such as the trend of the number of migrant workers in China (Figure 2) and the evolution of the rural population proportion in China and Spain (Figure 3), facilitated intuitive understanding of the intricate relationship between land reforms and rural population flow. These visual tools illustrated how changes in land policies affect population distribution and economic activities over time and space, making complex data accessible and engaging for a broad audience.

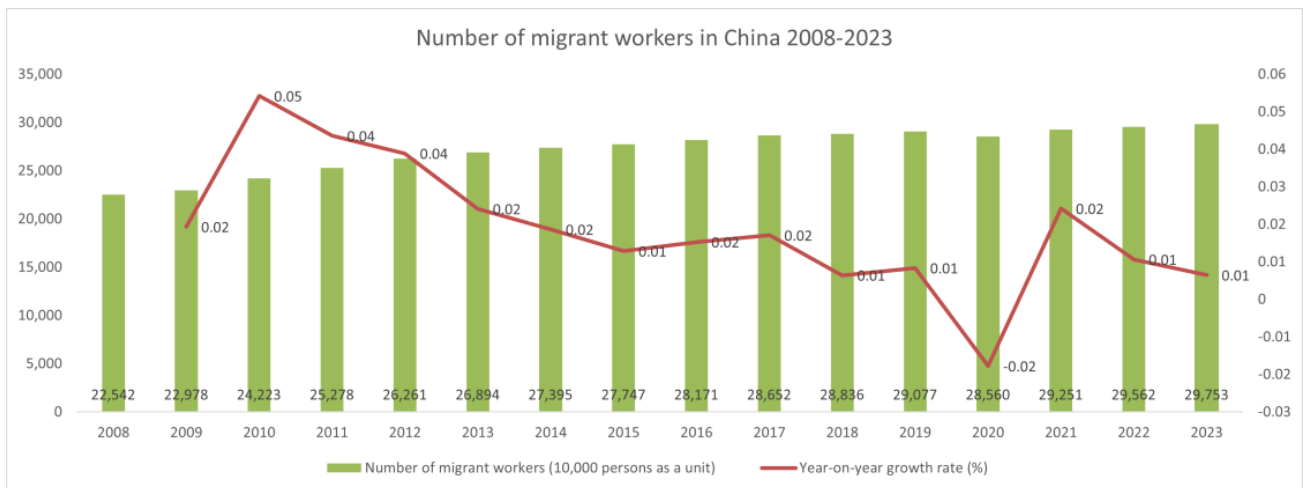


Figure 2. Number of migrant workers in China. Source: National Bureau of Statistics.

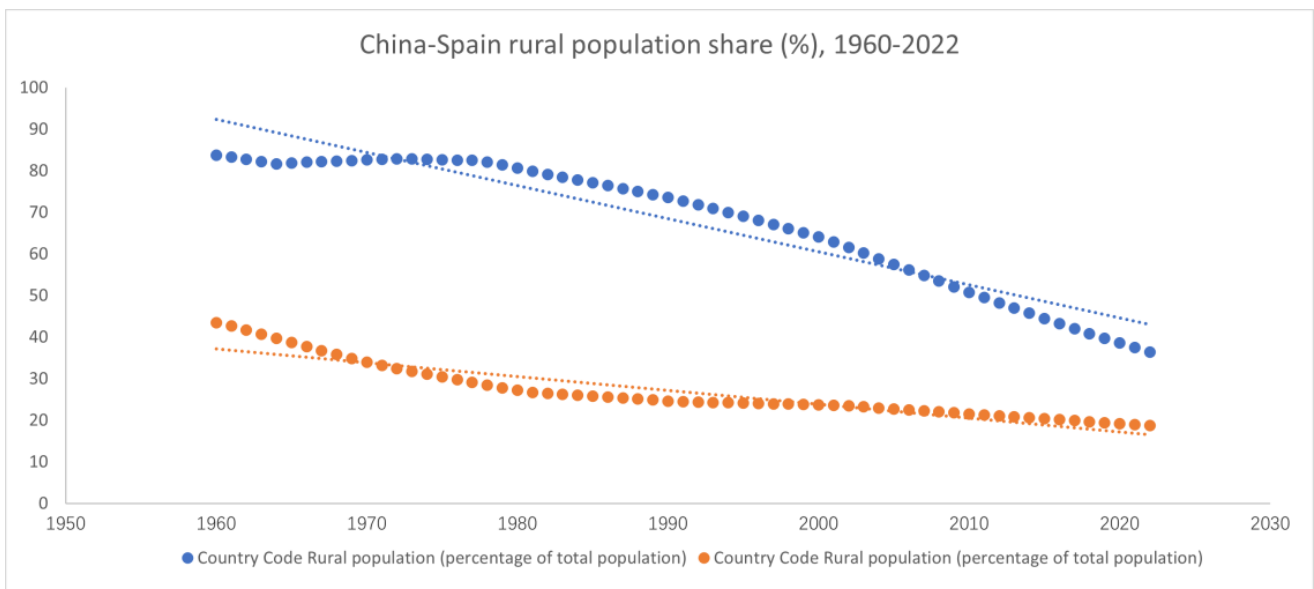


Figure 3. Proportion of rural population in China and Spain. Source: World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org.cn/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL?view=chart&locations=CN>. accessed on 17 June 2024.

3.3. Data Sources

The research drew upon extensive and reliable data from various official statistical agencies and authoritative databases. Primary data for China were sourced from the National Bureau of Statistics, providing crucial insights into rural population demographics, labor mobility proportions, and age structures. For Spain, data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) offered perspectives on the rural population share, agricultural labor force demographics, and Spanish migration patterns. Additional comparative data from the World Bank’s open database highlighted global trends in rural migration dynamics between China and Spain, emphasizing the broader context of globalization.

By integrating these methodologies, data sources, and visualization techniques, the study ensured a rigorous and insightful analysis of the interaction between land system reform and rural population flow, contributing valuable knowledge to policymakers, scholars, and the public discourse on rural development.

4. Research Results

4.1. Circulation of Land Contracting and Management Rights

Chinese Perspective

Since the implementation of the household contract responsibility system in 1978, China's policy concerning the circulation of land contract management rights has evolved from prohibition to gradual liberalization [40]. Recent measures, such as rights confirmation, certificate issuance, and the establishment of circulation markets, have clarified and strengthened farmers' land use rights, thereby enhancing their income rights. Land transfer provides a stable source of non-farm income, reduces agricultural dependence, motivates farmers to migrate to urban or non-agricultural sectors, and facilitates rational rural labor mobility [41].

European Perspective

In Europe, countries have achieved high levels of land privatization and possess mature land markets [42]. The flexibility to adjust land resource allocations through the sales and leases of land use rights promotes large-scale agricultural operations. This approach also diversifies income sources for farmers, lowers economic migration thresholds, and positively incentivizes labor mobility.

The interaction mechanism between land system reform and rural population flow shows similarities and differences between China and Europe. Both regions have increased asset mobility for farmers, reduced migration costs, and promoted labor flow through clear land rights definitions and improved circulation mechanisms [43]. However, China's policy under collective ownership focuses on balancing rural stability and development, whereas Europe's privatization-based free circulation market emphasizes market mechanisms. These differences reflect institutional innovations and strategic choices within distinct socio-economic contexts, offering diverse experiences and insights for global rural development and population mobility. Comparative research leverages these advantages to propose new ideas for enhancing land systems and facilitating efficient rural labor flow.

4.2. Reform of the Homestead System

China: The reform of the homestead system mainly includes a paid withdrawal mechanism and a pilot project for the transfer of use rights. These policies enable farmers to convert homestead assets into liquid capital, which not only enhances the value perception of rural housing assets but also provides financial support for farmers to buy houses and start businesses in cities and significantly enhances the economic foundation and willingness of rural residents to migrate to cities and towns. At the same time, the intensive use of homesteads promotes concentrated living and indirectly encourages population mobility [44].

Europe: In most European countries, the ownership of homesteads and residential buildings is clear, and the market is active. European countries promote rural–urban migration through effective real estate circulation and stimulate the multifunctional use of rural housing and promote urban–rural integration [45]. For example, rural tourism and elderly care have opened up new ways for rural labor mobility, and at the same time, they have also attracted urban residents to move to rural areas, promoting urban–rural integration.

4.3. Trends and Characteristics of Rural Population Flow

Seasonal migration typically aligns with cyclical agricultural production demands, wherein farmers engage in temporary work in cities or rural areas during slack seasons and return home for busy season production. This strategy, facilitated by the flexibility of the land system, allowing for short-term transfer or substitution farming, supports seasonal movement.

The cohort in China known as “migrant workers” has shown an overall upward trend between 2008 and 2021, albeit with fluctuating growth rates. Throughout this period, the flexibility of the land system played a crucial role. Policies allowing for short-term land transfer or substitution farming enable farmers to participate freely in the labor market

while retaining original land rights. This ensures their ability to return to agricultural production when necessary while also offering diversified employment opportunities and higher income potential.

Permanent relocation refers to the abandonment or long-term separation of farmers from agricultural production, relocating to cities or towns to live and work for an extended period. This phenomenon is closely intertwined with land system reforms, particularly improvements in policies regarding the circulation of land contract management rights. These reforms enable farmers to transfer land use rights confidently, securing stable income and reducing their reliance on land, thereby facilitating permanent migration to non-agricultural sectors.

In recent years, China has witnessed significant permanent displacement, evidenced by a marked decline in its rural population from 1960 to 2020, closely linked to land system reforms. The relaxation of policies governing the circulation of land contract management rights allows farmers greater flexibility in disposing of land use rights. This not only provides a stable source of non-agricultural income but also diminishes the socio-economic costs associated with urban migration. For instance, income derived from land transfers can serve as start-up capital for settling in cities or initiating businesses, thereby facilitating permanent population migration.

In European countries like Spain, compared to the long-term and large-scale rural-to-urban migration in China, there is a more globalized trend in population movement. Individuals commonly cross-national borders within the EU for work and living opportunities, reflecting a global trend of population mobility across European borders [46]. Intra-European cross-border population movement encompasses not only the short-term migration of rural laborers for agricultural work but also a wide range of industries and professions [47]. This includes high-skilled professionals and families seeking better living conditions, leveraging the free movement rights provided under the EU framework to relocate between different countries. This cross-border mobility is largely facilitated by the European integration process, especially the implementation of the Schengen Agreement, which has eliminated internal border checks and greatly eased the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrates that from 1960 to the present, the proportion of the rural population in China and Spain has changed significantly. The proportion of the rural population in China has shown a clear downward trend, decreasing from 82.2% in 1960 to 35.7% in 2020. In contrast, the proportion of the rural population in Spain has remained relatively stable, consistently around 20%. illustrates that from 1960 to the present, the proportion of the rural population in China and Spain has changed significantly. The proportion of the rural population in China has shown a clear downward trend, decreasing from 82.2% in 1960 to 35.7% in 2020. In contrast, the proportion of the rural population in Spain has remained relatively stable, consistently around 20%.

The rural population flow between China and Europe reveals distinct patterns and drivers of migration. Compared to Europe's regionally integrated rural population flow, China's rural labor migration is more significantly driven by the disparities between urban and rural economic development. This migration primarily manifests as the movement from rural areas to urban centers, where industrialization and service industries are more advanced, offering higher incomes and broader development opportunities. This migration often results in changes in family structure, forming groups of migrant workers who spend many years working in cities, returning to their rural hometowns only at specific times, such as during the Chinese New Year.

Therefore, while both China and Europe face the challenges and opportunities brought about by rural migration, Europe's cross-border mobility underscores its unique advantages of regional integration. In contrast, China's urban-rural migration more profoundly reflects the socio-economic transformation occurring during rapid industrialization and urbanization.

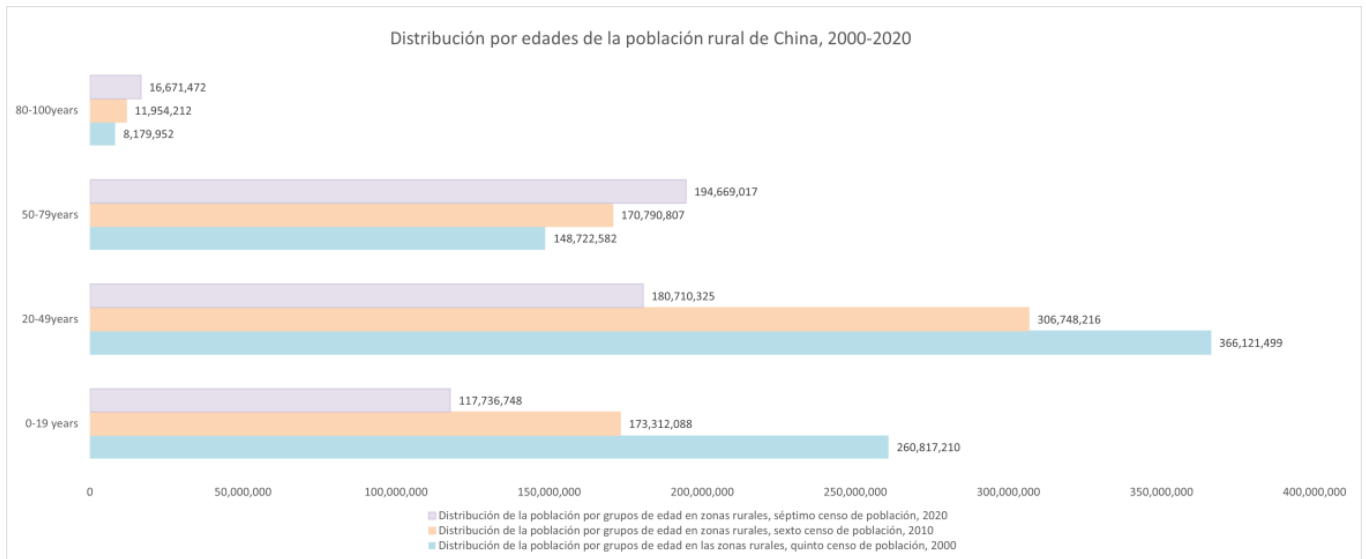


Figure 4. Changes in the age structure of China’s rural population from 2000 to 2020. Source: National Bureau of Statistics.

4.4. Impact of Population Movement on Land Use

The movement of the Chinese population, especially from rural to urban areas, has profoundly impacted land use patterns. According to the results of China’s three population censuses, the age structure of the rural population, shown in Figure 5, directly contributes to the unsustainability of traditional small-scale farming models. Many cultivated lands have been abandoned due to a lack of effective management. This abandonment not only affects the efficient use of land resources but also can lead to soil degradation and ecological imbalance [48]. Additionally, the labor shortage has created opportunities for large-scale agricultural operations. With the advancement of the land circulation policy, some farmers who have migrated out of rural areas are willing to transfer their land use rights to remaining farmers or agricultural enterprises, promoting land concentration and large-scale operations, thereby improving agricultural production efficiency.

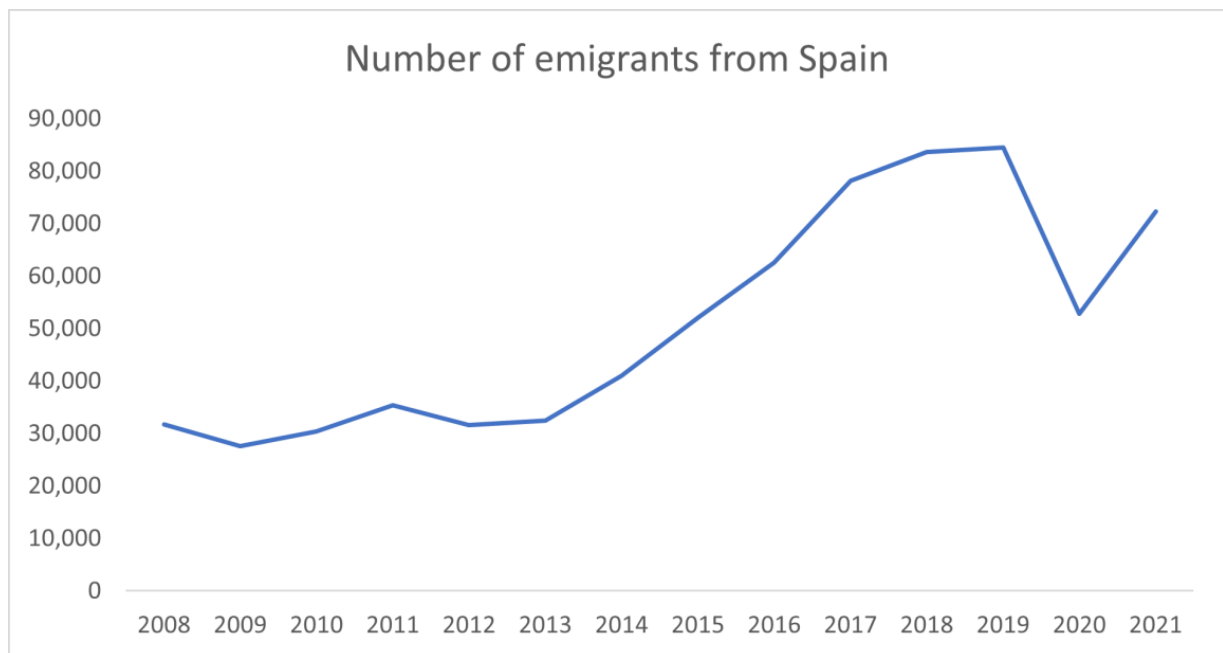


Figure 5. Spanish diaspora population, 2008–2021. Source: INE. National Institute of Statistics.

Furthermore, population movement has increased the mobility of the land market, significantly enhancing the activity of land circulation. This has led to the formation of diversified land circulation models, such as leasing and shareholding cooperation, which have laid the foundation for agricultural modernization and rural economic restructuring.

In Spain, the distribution of the agricultural labor force by age group, as illustrated in (Figure 6), provides crucial insights into the impact of population movements on land use. The figure shows a clear increase in the number of people engaged in agricultural labor with the rise in age groups, particularly among those aged 65 and above, who constitute the main body of the agricultural labor force. This trend directly reflects the aging population in rural Spain and the migration of younger workers to urban areas or other non-agricultural industries.

Age Distribution of the Population Working in Agricultural Production in Spain 2016

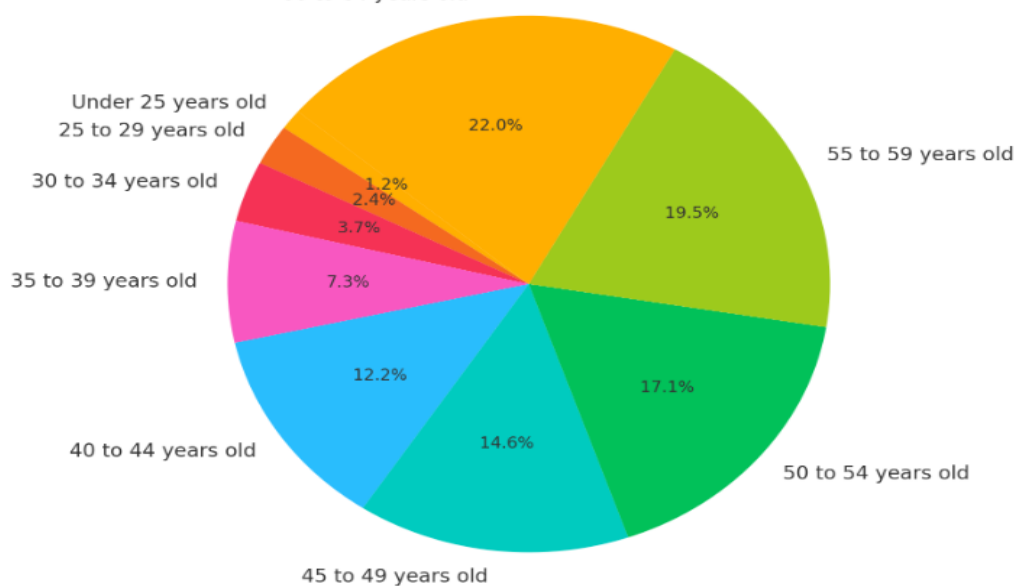


Figure 6. The age structure of the agricultural labor force in Spain, 2016. Data source: INE. National Institute of Statistics.

5. Discussion

In this work, we have confirmed that land policy and labor mobility are intrinsically related, and their interactions can significantly influence the efficiency of land use and social structural changes. China and Europe, with their distinct strategies, offer valuable lessons on how to address these challenges through policy innovation, international cooperation, and considerations of sustainability and equity. Future studies should continue to explore these dynamics to promote sustainable and equitable rural development on a global scale.

Land policy has a significant impact on rural labor migration patterns in both China and Europe. In China, the household responsibility system and the relaxation of land transfer policies have promoted large-scale agricultural operations, accelerated the transfer of labor to cities, and improved the liquidity of farmers' assets through homestead reform [10]. In Europe, the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has modernized agriculture and diversified the rural economy [12]. A mature land transfer market has provided non-agricultural employment opportunities, promoted population mobility, and facilitated intensive land use.

In Europe, the efficiency of agricultural innovation and technological advances have led to a 4% increase in productivity, highlighting the importance of sustainable practices and resource optimization [49]. At the same time, the European Green Deal expects to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030, which will require significant changes in food production and crop health strategies [50]. At the same time, China has implemented land trust services and "three rights separation" policies to address labor issues and prevent

land abandonment, ensure efficient land use, and provide stable incomes for workers in transitional urban areas [51].

Innovation in policies and international cooperation play a crucial role in addressing global demographic changes and labor shortages in agriculture. The experience of China [52] and Europe highlights the importance of developing adaptive policies that consider the urban and rural population dynamics. To address labor shortages, measures such as improving working conditions, investing in agricultural education and training, and aligning skills with industry demands are necessary [53]. Furthermore, the reliance on migrant agricultural workers in countries like Thailand, Italy, and Canada underscores the need to formulate inclusive policies that protect the rights and well-being of these workers, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic [54]. Preventing labor migration and increasing agricultural productivity require implementing minimum wage laws, providing social security, and promoting skill development [55]. Future research should focus on quantifying the impact of globalization on agricultural labor mobility, emphasizing cross-border policies, cooperation mechanisms, and innovative land systems that adapt to global population flows.

It is essential to explore innovative strategies and mechanisms, using land policy as a key lever for rural revitalization. This includes the diversification and comprehensive transformation of the rural economic structure. For instance, land consolidation policies, the promotion of moderate-scale operations, and support for the non-agricultural rural economy can attract capital and talent back to rural areas, stimulating innovation and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the integration of urban and rural development can enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of the rural economy.

6. Conclusions

The interaction mechanism between land system reform and rural population mobility in China and Europe reveals the complex connections and interactions between the two, providing important policy implications and a theoretical basis for promoting sustainable agricultural development, urban–rural integration, and rural social stability. This study finds that adjustments in land policy significantly impact rural labor migration patterns in both China and Europe. Population mobility, in turn, affects land use efficiency and social structural changes.

In China, the household responsibility system and subsequent relaxation of land transfer policies have promoted large-scale agricultural operations, accelerated labor transfer to cities, and improved farmers' asset liquidity through homestead reform. In Europe, exemplified by Spain, the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has advanced agricultural modernization and rural economic diversification. Moreover, a mature land transfer market has provided farmers with non-agricultural employment opportunities, promoted population mobility, and facilitated intensive land use.

Faced with challenges such as rural aging and depopulation, China and the EU have adopted different strategies. Europe has addressed the reduction in the labor force through agricultural technology, mechanization, and cooperatives, while China has developed land trust services and "separation of powers" policies to mitigate land abandonment and labor shortages. The study highlights the importance of policy innovation and international cooperation, particularly in the context of globalization, to address demographic changes and agricultural labor shortages, ensuring sustainable land use and protecting farmers' rights and interests.

This study provides profound insights into the interaction mechanisms between land policy adjustments and rural labor mobility in China and Europe. However, it has some limitations:

First, the study's time span ends in 2020. Consequently, the latest developments in land policies, such as recent changes in land transfer, homestead reform, and rural labor mobility policies in China and Europe, are not captured. This limitation may affect the timeliness and comprehensiveness of the study's conclusions.

Second, while the study utilizes a rich array of data sources to quantitatively analyze the correlation between land policy adjustments and rural labor mobility, the exploration of specific quantitative relationships requires further strengthening. More refined models and data analyses are necessary to accurately measure the impact of land policy adjustments on the willingness and patterns of rural labor migration. Additionally, it is crucial to examine how these changes influence land use efficiency and social structures.

Future research should delve deeper into quantitative analyses to explore the impact of globalization on agricultural labor mobility and how to innovate land systems to adapt to global population flow trends through cross-border learning and cooperation. Considerations of sustainability and equity must be included to ensure that land policies promote resource sustainability while protecting the rights and interests of farmers, especially vulnerable groups. Additionally, exploring innovative strategies and mechanisms, such as using land policy as a key lever for rural revitalization, is crucial for diversifying and comprehensively transforming the rural economic structure.

In summary, the interaction mechanism between land system reform and rural population mobility is a dynamic evolutionary process that requires continuous attention and timely adjustments by policymakers. Such measures can play an active role in the global strategy for sustainable agricultural development and rural revitalization. Through in-depth research and international cooperation, we can continuously optimize policy design, achieve urban–rural integration, and promote the comprehensive development of rural socio-economic structures.

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