Research on the Mechanisms and Paths of New-Quality Productive Forces Empowering Urban-Rural Integrated Development in Suzhou

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Abstract: Adhering to urban-rural integrated development and smoothing the two-way flow of urban-rural factors, with integration being a key path to common prosperity. New-quality productive forces (NPP), driven by technological innovation, offer a new approach to breaking the urban-rural dual structure. Taking Suzhou as the research object, this paper empirically tests NPP's empowering effect, transmission mechanism and threshold characteristics on urban-rural integration using the improved entropy weight-TOPSIS method, threshold regression model and mediation effect model, based on 2023-2025 panel data. Results show NPP significantly promotes Suzhou's integration (benchmark coefficient 0.326, $p<0.01$); industrial integration (31.3%), factor mobility (26.4%) and public service equalization (23.9%) are core mediation channels. The effect has a double threshold based on market development, doubling after crossing 3.25 (coefficient from 0.156 to 0.562). Facing issues like insufficient industrial coordination and obstructed factor flow, Suzhou needs to unlock NPP's potential via innovation-driven development, breaking factor barriers and promoting service equalization. This study provides theoretical and practical references for urban-rural integration in northern Anhui's agricultural cities.

Keywords: New-Quality Productive Forces; Urban-Rural Integration; Mediation Effect; Threshold Effect; Suzhou

1. Introduction

Urban-rural integrated development is a core measure to break the dual structure and advance Chinese-style modernization. Currently, China's urban-rural integration has entered a critical stage of two-way factor flow, but agricultural regions still face deep-seated issues like weak industrial linkage and unequal public services. The 2023-proposed new-quality productive forces (NPP), featuring digitalization, greenization, and intelligence, align with integration's core demands and injected new momentum [1].

As a key agricultural city in northern Anhui and major grain base, Suzhou approved 38 "Tongji" Science and Technology Program projects in 2025, with 14.2 million yuan in fiscal sci-tech investment and 17.826 billion yuan in AI industry investment. It has achieved remarkable results in digital agriculture and rural e-commerce, laying a solid foundation for NPP empowerment. However, its integration remains at a medium-low level (comprehensive index 0.482 in 2025) with significant county-level disparities (Dagum Gini coefficient 0.182), and NPP's potential is underutilized.

Existing studies mostly focus on the provincial scale, lacking targeted analysis of agricultural prefecture-level cities and insufficient exploration of NPP's threshold characteristics and regional adaptability. Based on Suzhou's practice, this paper constructs a "theoretical mechanism - empirical test - policy optimization" framework to explore NPP's internal logic and paths. It fills the regional research gap and provides replicable experience for Suzhou, northern Anhui, and similar national regions, with important theoretical and practical value.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Measurement and Empowerment Logic of New-Quality Productive Forces

The measurement of new-quality productive forces has formed a paradigm of "multi-dimensional indicator system + objective weighting", with core dimensions including technological innovation, digital empowerment, and green development [2]. The main measurement methods are the entropy weight-TOPSIS method and panel threshold model [3]. Measurement indicators vary significantly across regions: economically developed eastern regions focus on dimensions such as the digital economy and high-end manufacturing, while central and western agricultural regions need to strengthen characteristic indicators such as agricultural modernization and rural e-commerce [4]. Existing studies have the problem of insufficient indicator adaptability; for example, some agricultural regions adopt the measurement framework of industrial-dominated regions, failing to fully reflect the unique role of new-quality productive forces in agricultural transformation. Regarding the empowerment mechanism, scholars generally believe that technological penetration, industrial integration, and factor restructuring are the core paths for new-quality productive forces to drive urban-rural integration [5]. Among them, the promoting effect of digital technology on agricultural production efficiency has been widely verified, but the coupling mechanism between green technology and urban-rural integration still needs in-depth exploration.

2.2 Key Constraints on Urban-Rural Integrated Development

The core contradictions of urban-rural integration focus on industrial dual segmentation, barriers to factor mobility, and unequal public services [6]. From an empirical perspective, China's urban-rural integrated development presents a spatial pattern of "high in the east and low in the west, strong in cities and weak in rural areas", with particularly prominent urban-rural gaps in agricultural concentration areas such as northern Anhui [7]. New-quality productive forces provide possibilities to solve these problems by promoting agricultural modernization, facilitating two-way factor flow, and empowering the digitalization of public services. However, existing studies pay insufficient attention to the characteristics of factor flow at the county level and the causes of regional differences [8]. For example, some studies only focus on the flow of capital and talents at the provincial level, ignoring the differences in micro-factor allocation such as land transfer and financial support among counties in agricultural regions, resulting in a lack of precision in policy recommendations. In addition, new issues in urban-rural integration, such as the digital divide and technological application thresholds, have not received sufficient attention.

2.3 Threshold Effect and Regulation Mechanism

Some studies have confirmed that the empowerment effect of new-quality productive forces has a threshold characteristic of "effective market + capable government" [9], and the level of digital economic development and marketization may affect empowerment efficiency. Specifically, the degree of marketization indirectly regulates the relationship between new-quality productive forces and urban-rural integration by influencing factor allocation efficiency and technological transformation speed. Most existing studies use national or provincial panel data as samples and find that regions with higher marketization have a stronger empowerment effect of new-quality productive forces. However, the identification of threshold conditions for agricultural regions is insufficient. For example, the overall marketization level in northern Anhui is relatively low (Suzhou's market development level index was 2.15 in 2025), and its threshold value may be significantly different from that in developed eastern regions. Moreover, the interaction of regulatory variables such as government intervention and infrastructure level has not been fully explored, leading to an incomplete understanding of the nonlinear relationship.

In summary, existing studies still have three gaps: first, the lack of micro-empirical research on agricultural prefecture-level cities; second, insufficient attention to the differentiated empowerment paths under county-level differences; third, inadequate analysis of the regional adaptability of threshold effects. Based on Suzhou's data, this paper focuses on filling the above research gaps.

3. Mechanism Analysis and Research Hypotheses

3.1 Direct Empowerment Effect

New-quality productive forces, with technological innovation as the core, rely on technology diffusion theory and industrial upgrading theory to restructure the agricultural production system through digital and intelligent technologies, thereby improving total factor productivity in agriculture [10]. For example, the application of digital agricultural technologies can realize precision irrigation and intelligent fertilization, reducing production losses; the combination of artificial intelligence and agriculture can optimize supply chain management and improve the circulation efficiency of agricultural products. At the same time, new-quality productive forces give birth to new formats such as rural e-commerce, rural tourism, and smart agriculture, creating diversified employment opportunities, breaking the traditional pattern of one-way urban-rural factor flow, promoting the return of capital and talents to rural areas, and thus narrowing the urban-rural income gap and industrial gap. From Suzhou's practice, the construction of digital agricultural demonstration bases has driven an average increase of 1,200 yuan in per capita income of surrounding farmers, confirming the direct empowerment effect of new-quality productive forces. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: New-quality productive forces have a significant positive empowerment effect on Suzhou's urban-rural integrated development.

3.2 Mediating Transmission Mechanism

The empowerment effect of new-quality productive forces is realized through multiple channels: first, industrial integration. Digital technology breaks the urban-rural industrial boundary, promotes the coordinated development of the primary, secondary, and tertiary industries in rural areas, and forms an integrated model of "agriculture + processing + services", addressing the urban-rural industrial dual segmentation. For example, Dangshan County has developed intensive processing of crisp pears and rural tourism relying on digital technology, realizing the extension of the agricultural industrial chain; second, factor mobility. Technological innovation attracts the return of urban capital and high-quality talents to rural areas by increasing the return rate of rural industries, optimizing the allocation of urban-rural resources. The rapid development of rural e-commerce in Suzhou has attracted more than 3,000 returning talents to start businesses, driving the growth of rural financial loan demand; third, equalization of public services. Digital technology builds a shared platform for urban-rural public services, promoting the sinking of high-quality education and medical resources and narrowing the urban-rural service gap [11]. For example, distance education platforms allow rural students to share high-quality urban courses, and telemedicine technology can improve the diagnosis and treatment level of rural medical institutions. These three channels are interrelated and work synergistically, forming a transmission network for new-quality productive forces to empower urban-rural integration. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: New-quality productive forces empower urban-rural integration through three mediating channels: industrial integration, factor mobility, and equalization of public services.

3.3 Threshold Effect Characteristics

The degree of marketization determines factor allocation efficiency and technological transformation effectiveness [10], and its regulatory effect on the empowerment effect of new-quality productive forces presents a threshold characteristic. When the market development level is low, there are barriers to factor flow and a lack of effective incentives for technological transformation, which hinders the technological diffusion and industrial collaboration of new-quality productive forces, resulting in a weak empowerment effect; with the improvement of marketization, factor flow becomes smoother, the innovation ecosystem is more improved, and technological achievements can be quickly transformed into actual productive forces, significantly enhancing the empowerment effect of new-quality productive forces. Combined with Suzhou's reality, its marketization level is in the medium-low range and has not crossed the high-level threshold, leading to difficulties in large-scale promotion of some digital agricultural technologies. In addition, factors such as government intervention and infrastructure level may interact with the degree of marketization to further strengthen the threshold effect. For example, improved

transportation and communication infrastructure can reduce market transaction costs and help cross the marketization threshold. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed: H3: The empowerment effect of new-quality productive forces on urban-rural integration has a threshold characteristic based on the level of market development; the higher the degree of marketization, the stronger the empowerment effect.

4. Research Design and Data Sources

4.1 Data Sources

The data are sourced from the *Suzhou Statistical Yearbook (2023-2025)*, public reports of the Suzhou Science and Technology Bureau, Anhui Provincial Urban-Rural Integration Development Monitoring Data, and field survey data of the research team. Among them, the statistical yearbook and science and technology bureau reports provide objective data such as R&D investment, number of patent authorizations, and urban-rural income ratio; the Anhui Provincial Urban-Rural Integration Development Monitoring Data include standardized indicators such as public services and infrastructure; the field survey covers 20 towns in 5 counties (districts) of Suzhou, and micro-data such as the rural land transfer rate and the application of digital agricultural technologies are obtained through questionnaires and interviews, with an effective recovery rate of 89.2%. In the data processing process, the mean imputation method is used to handle a small number of missing values (missing ratio less than 3%) to ensure data integrity; at the same time, outliers are eliminated through outlier detection (Z-score method) to avoid interference with empirical results.

4.2 Variable Definition

Explained variable: Urban-Rural Integration Development Level (URCI). Referring to the research of Zheng et al. [4], 21 indicators are selected from three dimensions: economic integration, social integration, and spatial integration (such as the urban-rural per capita income ratio, the ratio of high-quality urban-rural teachers, and the ratio of urban-rural highway density). The improved entropy weight-TOPSIS method is used for calculation. The indicator selection balances scientificity and data availability, fully reflecting the characteristics of agricultural regions.

Table 1. Variable Definitions and Measurement Indicators

Variable Type	Variable Name	Variable Symbol	Measurement Indicators
Explained Variable	Urban-Rural Integration Development Level	URCI	Comprehensive index of economic + social + spatial integration
Explanatory Variable	New-Quality Productive Forces Development Level	NPP	Comprehensive index of technological innovation + digital economy + green development
Mediating Variables	Industrial Integration	IC	Agricultural product processing rate + proportion of rural tourism income, etc.
	Factor Mobility	FM	Proportion of rural financial loans + growth rate of returning entrepreneurial talents, etc.
	Public Service Equalization	PS	Urban-rural medical insurance reimbursement ratio + coverage rate of elderly care facilities, etc.
Threshold Variable	Market Development Level	Market	Proportion of non-public ownership economy + growth rate of the number of enterprises, etc.
Control Variables	Economic Development Level	PGDP	Per capita regional GDP (10,000 yuan/person)
	Industrial Structure	IS	Proportion of added value of the secondary and tertiary industries in GDP (%)
	Infrastructure Level	INF	Highway density (km/km²)

Explanatory variable: New-Quality Productive Forces Development Level (NPP). Drawing on the measurement framework of Zhou et al. [2], 18 indicators are selected from four dimensions: technological innovation input, output, digital economy, and green development (such as

R&D investment as a percentage of GDP, number of patent authorizations, and number of digital agricultural demonstration bases). The improved entropy weight-TOPSIS method is used for calculation, with enhanced weights for indicators consistent with Suzhou's development, such as digital agriculture and green agriculture.

Mediating variables: Industrial Integration (IC), Factor Mobility (FM), and Public Service Equalization (PS), all calculated by the multi-index comprehensive index method. Among them, industrial integration includes indicators such as the agricultural product processing rate and the proportion of rural tourism income; factor mobility covers indicators such as the proportion of rural financial loans and the growth rate of returning entrepreneurial talents; public service equalization selects indicators such as the urban-rural medical insurance reimbursement ratio and the coverage rate of elderly care facilities.

Threshold variable: Market Development Level (Market). A comprehensive index is constructed from three dimensions: marketization degree, market entity vitality, and openness, including the proportion of the non-public ownership economy, the growth rate of the number of enterprises, and the proportion of total import and export volume in GDP.

Control variables: Economic Development Level (PGDP), Industrial Structure (IS), and Infrastructure Level (INF), with specific definitions shown in Table 1.

4.3 Research Methods

Improved entropy weight-TOPSIS method: Used to measure URCI and NPP. This method objectively determines indicator weights through the entropy weight method, avoiding subjective weighting biases [6]. The specific steps are: indicator standardization → calculation of information entropy and weights → construction of positive and negative ideal solutions → calculation of closeness (i.e., comprehensive index).

Mediating effect model: A combination of stepwise regression and the Bootstrap method is used to test the transmission effect of industrial integration, factor mobility, and public service equalization. The first step is to test the total effect of new-quality productive forces on urban-rural integration; the second step is to test the impact of new-quality productive forces on mediating variables; the third step is to include both new-quality productive forces and mediating variables in the model to test the direct effect and mediating effect. The number of Bootstrap samples is set to 500 to ensure the robustness of the results.

Threshold regression model: Used to verify the threshold effect of the market development level. The Hansen (1999) panel threshold model is adopted, and the Bootstrap method is used for repeated sampling (300 times) to determine the threshold value and critical value, and test the significance of the threshold effect; at the same time, the likelihood ratio test is used to verify the authenticity of the threshold value, ensuring the rationality of the model setting.

5. Empirical Results and Analysis

5.1 Measurement Results of Development Levels

Urban-rural integration development level: URCI increased from 0.386 to 0.482 between 2023 and 2025, with an average annual growth rate of 12.2%, showing a steady upward trend. From a dimensional perspective, the spatial integration index is the highest (0.511 in 2025), mainly due to the continuous improvement of urban-rural highways, communications, and other infrastructure in Suzhou in recent years; the economic integration index is the lowest (0.398), reflecting that the urban-rural industrial gap is still a core shortcoming. From a regional perspective, Yongqiao District, as the main urban area, has a comprehensive index of 0.563 in 2025, significantly higher than other counties, relying on its economic foundation and resource agglomeration advantages; Dangshan County and Xiao County have comprehensive indexes of 0.478 and 0.465 respectively, empowered by characteristic agricultural industries; Lingbi County and Sixian County have weak economic foundations and a single industrial structure, with comprehensive indexes of only 0.412 and 0.398. Calculated by the Dagum Gini coefficient, the inter-regional Gini coefficient is 0.182, indicating obvious county-level differences, and the differences are mainly due to inter-regional gaps (contribution rate 65.3%), with intra-regional gaps and super-variable density contributing 23.1% and 11.6% respectively.

New-quality productive forces development level: NPP increased from 0.278 to 0.421

between 2023 and 2025, a growth of 51.4% in three years, with a significantly higher growth rate than the urban-rural integration level. From a dimensional perspective, the digital economy development index performs the best (0.418 in 2025), benefiting from the landing of artificial intelligence industrial projects and the rapid expansion of rural e-commerce; the technological innovation output index is relatively weak (0.285), reflecting insufficient efficiency in transforming R&D investment into actual results. From a regional perspective, the comprehensive index of new-quality productive forces in Yongqiao District is 0.503, Dangshan County 0.432, Xiao County 0.415, Lingbi County 0.389, and Sixian County 0.367. The regional distribution is highly consistent with the urban-rural integration level, confirming the correlation between the two.

5.2 Benchmark Regression Results (H1 Test)

The benchmark regression adopts a two-way fixed effects model. The results show (Table 2) that the coefficient of NPP is 0.326 ($p<0.01$), indicating that for each 1-unit increase in new-quality productive forces, the urban-rural integration level increases by 0.326 units, and H1 is established. Among the control variables, the coefficient of PGDP is 0.215 ($p<0.01$), indicating that the economic development level is the basic support for urban-rural integration; the coefficient of IS is 0.182 ($p<0.05$), indicating that industrial structure upgrading (increase in the proportion of the secondary and tertiary industries) can promote urban-rural factor linkage; the coefficient of INF is 0.258 ($p<0.01$), verifying the guarantee role of improved infrastructure in urban-rural integration. The R^2 of the model is 0.735, indicating that the variable selection and model setting have good explanatory power.

Table 2. Benchmark Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	P-value
NPP	0.326***	0.058	5.62	0.000
PGDP	0.215***	0.042	5.12	0.000
IS	0.182**	0.076	2.39	0.017
INF	0.258***	0.061	4.23	0.000
_cons	0.102	0.065	1.57	0.116
Individual Effects	Yes	-	-	-
Time Effects	Yes	-	-	-
R^2	0.735	-	-	-

Note: *** and ** indicate significance at the 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

5.3 Mediating Effect Analysis (H2 Test)

The Bootstrap method is used to test the mediating effect. The results show (Table 3) that the 95% confidence intervals of the three mediating variables do not contain 0, indicating that the mediating effect is significant. Industrial integration has the strongest mediating effect (0.102, accounting for 31.3%), indicating that new-quality productive forces effectively address dual segmentation by promoting urban-rural industrial collaboration, which is consistent with the practical results of digital agriculture and rural e-commerce in Suzhou; the mediating effect coefficient of factor mobility is 0.086 (accounting for 26.4%), indicating that the role of new-quality productive forces in promoting the return of capital and talents to rural areas is gradually emerging but still limited by mobility barriers; the mediating effect coefficient of public service equalization is 0.078 (accounting for 23.9%), reflecting that digital technology has achieved certain results in empowering the sinking of public services, but the coverage and depth are insufficient. The total mediating effect accounts for 81.6%, indicating that the three channels are the core paths for new-quality productive forces to empower urban-rural integration, and H2 is established.

Table 3. Mediating Effect Test Results

Mediating Variable	Mediating Effect Coefficient	Standard Error	95% Confidence Interval	Effect Proportion
Industrial Integration (IC)	0.102***	0.021	[0.063, 0.145]	31.3%
Factor Mobility (FM)	0.086**	0.032	[0.025, 0.148]	26.4%
Public Service Equalization (PS)	0.078**	0.029	[0.023, 0.135]	23.9%

5.4 Threshold Effect Analysis (H3 Test)

The threshold regression results show (Table 4) that there is a double threshold effect ($\gamma1=1.82$, $\gamma2=3.25$), and the threshold effect is significant (F-statistics are 15.32 and 12.89, respectively, $p<0.01$). When Market≤1.82, the coefficient of NPP is 0.156 ($p<0.05$). At this time, the marketization level is low, factor flow is not smooth, and technological transformation is hindered, resulting in a weak empowerment effect; when 1.82<Market≤3.25, the coefficient rises to 0.389 ($p<0.01$). The improvement of marketization promotes the optimization of factor allocation, and the empowerment effect is significantly enhanced. Suzhou's market development level index in 2025 is 2.15, which is in this interval; when Market>3.25, the coefficient reaches 0.562 ($p<0.01$). After the marketization level crosses the high-level threshold, the innovation ecosystem is improved, and the empowerment effect multiplies. The results verify H3, indicating that an "effective market" is a key condition for new-quality productive forces to fully release their empowerment potential.

Table 4. Threshold Regression Results

Threshold Interval	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	P-value
Market≤1.82	0.156**	0.068	2.29	0.022
1.82<Market≤3.25	0.389***	0.072	5.40	0.000
Market>3.25	0.562***	0.085	6.61	0.000
R^2	0.786	-	-	-

5.5 Robustness Test and Heterogeneity Analysis

Two methods are used for robustness testing: first, replacing the measurement method of the core explanatory variable, using principal component analysis to recalculate NPP, and the regression coefficient is 0.301 ($p<0.01$), which is not substantially different from the benchmark result; second, excluding the sample of Yongqiao District (to avoid the interference of the special effect of the main urban area), the coefficient of NPP is still significantly positive (0.295, $p<0.01$); third, changing the sample period and selecting data from 2023 to 2024 for regression, the coefficient is 0.318 ($p<0.01$), indicating that the results are robust and reliable. Heterogeneity analysis shows that the empowerment effect of each dimension of new-quality productive forces on urban-rural integration is different: the coefficient of the digital economy dimension is the highest (0.289, $p<0.01$), the coefficient of the green development dimension is 0.213 ($p<0.01$), and the coefficients of the technological innovation input and output dimensions are 0.198 ($p<0.05$) and 0.176 ($p<0.05$), respectively. From a regional perspective, the empowerment coefficients of Yongqiao District and Dangshan County (0.387, 0.352) are significantly higher than those of Lingbi County and Sixian County (0.276, 0.258), reflecting the impact of the county-level development foundation on the empowerment effect and providing a basis for formulating differentiated policies.

6. Conclusions

Based on Suzhou's 2023-2025 panel data, empirical analysis yields core conclusions: First, new-quality productive forces (NPP) exert a significant positive effect on urban-rural integration (benchmark coefficient 0.326, $p<0.01$). Both grew steadily during the period but remained at a medium-low level with notable county-level disparities (Dagum Gini coefficient 0.182). Second, industrial integration (31.3%), factor mobility (26.4%), and public service equalization (23.9%) serve as core mediating channels, accounting for 81.6% of the total effect and forming the key transmission network. Third, the empowerment effect features a double threshold based on market development: crossing 3.25 multiplies the coefficient from 0.156 to 0.562, while Suzhou currently lies in the second interval (Market=2.15) with substantial room for improvement. Fourth, prominent constraints persist: insufficient industrial collaboration (25% agricultural product processing rate), hindered factor flow (22.3% rural financial loan ratio), weak innovation (1.2% R&D investment), and unequal public services (18% high-quality rural teachers), limiting NPP's empowerment potential.

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