

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

5-2022

Rural revitalization in China: Towards inclusive geographies of ruralization

Ningning CHEN

Lily KONG

Singapore Management University, lilykong@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Rural Sociology Commons](#)

Citation

CHEN, Ningning, & KONG, Lily.(2022). Rural revitalization in China: Towards inclusive geographies of ruralization. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 12(12), 213-217.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/3676

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylids@smu.edu.sg.

Rural revitalization in China: Towards inclusive geographies of ruralization

Dialogues in Human Geography
2022, Vol. 12(2) 213–217
© The Author(s) 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/20438206221102933
journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



Ningning Chen 
National University of Singapore, Singapore

Lily Kong 
Singapore Management University, Singapore

Abstract

This commentary welcomes Gillen et al.'s geographies of ruralization as an alternative to the urban-centered analysis of socio-spatial transformation in post-reform China. We offer three perspectives to further develop such alternative articulation by drawing on China's most recent geographical experiences of rural revitalization. The first is the 'top-down' process of rural revitalization launched by different levels of Chinese state agents and how this is divergent from local needs or embedded in bottom-up engagement. The second is the temporal dimension of ruralization highlighting how uses of the past are implicated in and legitimize the state agenda of rural revitalization. The third directs attention to the entanglement of nature and culture – that is, how a harmonious human–nature approach to rural revitalization is produced in discourse and practice. We argue that these alternative insights offer possibilities of developing more inclusive geographies of ruralization in the Global South and beyond.

Keywords

China, nature–culture, past, ruralization, rural revitalization, state

In recent years, scholars have increasingly moved beyond an urban-centered analysis of socio-spatial transformation towards a relational view of rural – urban interactions (Ghosh, 2017; Woods, 2007). Gillen et al. (2022) intervene in the debate by proposing three geographies of ruralization, namely in-situ ruralization, extended ruralization, and rural returns. These three processes, they believe, are prevalent in Southeast Asia where people's lives and perceptions of urbanization are entangled with ongoing rural dynamics. Their theorization of ruralization not only demonstrates the ongoing

significance of rurality in understanding human geographical experiences in rural and urban worlds, but also challenges the extant residual understanding of the rural amid urbanization. We respond to Gillen et al.'s article by drawing on post-reform China's geographical experiences of rural revitalization.

Corresponding author:

Ningning Chen, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, AS8, #07-01, 10 Kent Ridge Crescents, Singapore 119260, Singapore.
Email: ningning@u.nus.edu

China's rural revitalization: Geographies of ruralization in practice

Rapid urbanization in China over the past four decades has led to a series of problems such as widening rural – urban inequalities, brain drains, the hollowing out, and decline of villages. To resolve these problems, the Chinese central government officially announced a national strategy of rural revitalization (*Xiangcun Zhenxing*, 乡村振兴) in late 2017. China's recent rural revitalization campaign plays out Gillen et al.'s three geographies of ruralization. Rural revitalization in many Chinese rural areas is enacted through *in-situ ruralization* which involves the ongoing reproduction of normally-perceived rural spaces (e.g. agricultural landscape and village settlement) and the blurring of rural – urban boundaries. The launching of numerous rural revitalization projects by different levels of state agents and rural communities has significantly transformed village landscapes, patterns of land use, dwelling spaces, livelihood strategies, and governing structure (Fois et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019). While undergoing rapidly urbanizing processes, village revitalization also does not transit neatly from agricultural to industrial sectors, or from rural to urban living. In most cases, traditional rural elements persist and become intertwined with urban ones, producing hybrid ruralities (see Lin et al., 2016).

Rural revitalization also opens up new possibilities for or intensifies the existing process of *extended ruralization* in which rurality persists and penetrates into peri-urban regions and cities. Kipnis (2013) reminded us that peasant migrants in urban China could not break completely from rural life, keeping small-scale farming practices, kinship relations, and rural-oriented consumption habits. These continuities significantly ruralized the (peri-)urban landscape (Chung, 2013). In the national policy of rural revitalization, the government issued calls to 'understand agriculture, love the peasantry and love the countryside'. Such new narratives have moved away from the decades-long negative discourse around the nostalgic/positive imaginations of the rural as the roots of Chinese

civilization (Wu et al., 2019). Such shifting official discourses can have enduring impacts on the everyday lives of people in (peri-)urban regions whose practices are emancipated and can be more openly animated by rural imaginaries and nostalgia. Anxious about stressful urban lifestyles, they especially desire close-knit community relations and senses of rootedness that are often seen as a core part of rural dweller identity (Chio, 2017). Such longings have the potential to influence the ways planners and policy makers bring idyllic rural architectures, lifestyles, and landscapes into cities and their re-design.

In addition, rural revitalization generates new momentum in *rural returns*. The shifting narratives of the rural impel people's re-imagining of their relationship to the countryside. This change has driven the return of many Chinese middle-class urban residents to their home villages either through temporal visits or through rural lifestyle investment. Paralleling this process, rural revitalization encompasses the process of migrant workers, university students, and other young people returning from the city to the countryside to set up their businesses, or engage in agricultural modernization, rural industrialization, or village construction projects. In line with the national strategy, different regions and places have introduced a wide range of incentive policies to encourage rural returns, including venture capital funds, social security subsidies, employment support mechanisms, and financial service. Apart from such material and institutional support, returnees are also motivated to maintain a sense of rural identity, accessing collective farmland, and living a rural lifestyle (see Wu et al., 2019). The ongoing process of rural returns seems a great reversal of the long 'hollowed-out' condition of numerous villages.

Alternative articulations

While we welcome Gillen et al.'s theorization of ruralization as helpful in understanding China's rural revitalization, we turn here to examine how Chinese ways of revitalizing the countryside offer alternative insights into ruralizing processes and experiences.

Top-down approach

Gillen et al.'s theorization prioritizes the 'bottom-up' dimensions of ruralization while ignoring the 'top-down' ruralizing process at play. As mentioned earlier, rural revitalization was launched by the central Chinese government as one crucial national strategy. The top-down nature of China's rural revitalization is part of what Yan et al. (2021) call a 'state-guided periphery strategy' for capital flows to areas that have uneven and insufficient development. In response to the national strategy, Chinese (quasi)state agents at different (provincial, municipal, county, and township) localities formulate their own specific rural revitalization projects, enacting different state-society relationships. For instance, Liu et al. (2019) examine how state-dominated village reconstruction projects can lead to effective planning, guidance, and implementation as well as realize highly efficient land use. Yet, the state-led project often ignores the needs of local villagers and even results in discontent.

On the ground, the implementation of many government-initiated revitalization projects stands a chance of success only with bottom-up involvement. The incorporation of community engagement allows a state-led initiative to be embedded in the community. Wu et al. (2019) demonstrate that community involvement is crucial for successful rural revitalization as local communities can bridge their connections with migrants in the cities and hence bring external resources for the development of home villages. Listening to, respecting, and emphasizing the voices and needs of rural communities can align governmental projects better with local socio-spatial conditions, and help avoid tensions and facilitate the smooth implication of projects (Liu et al., 2019). In so doing, it not only counterbalances the domination of the top-down approach, but also moves towards sustainable and endogenous ruralization.

Uses of the past

Gillen et al. discuss the temporality of ruralization in terms of extended ruralization. Their account of rural dynamics is oriented more towards the

present and the future. We offer an intervention that highlights how policy narratives of rural revitalization are featured not only with claims in the present and to the future, but are also strongly imbued with an engagement with the past. In China, the historical developmental trajectory is used as a crucial tool to legitimize present-day rural revitalization strategy. Over the past three decades, rural China has played a crucial role in backing up national industrialization and urbanization strategies with the provision of cheap labor, food, and other raw materials (Wong et al., 2022). Such urban-centered developmental strategy has led to the widened rural – urban gap and a wide range of rural problems. The emphasis on the historical legacies of contemporary rural problems in official narratives justifies the necessity for a new developmental strategy aiming to build rural areas with thriving business, ecologically sound environments, social civility, effective governance, and prosperity (Xinhua, 2017). In this sense, historical developmental trajectories and lessons play a crucial role in forming and shaping contemporary geographies of rural revitalization.

Moreover, the past 'rural' elements (e.g. tradition) are seen as having the potential to boost rural revitalization. The official narratives are redolent with meanings of home village or native place, evoking people's rootedness and place of origin. Such emphasis on rural nostalgia has potential to motivate people of all walks to make contributions to the rural revitalization strategy. In the state view, tradition is also seen as a crucial resource to boost rural economic development. In the Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization (2018–2022) launched by the central government, there is a call for discovering local history, traditional knowledge, and heritage as well as making reasonable use of village traditions and resources for endogenous development. For instance, the case of a village in Hebei Province in North China rediscovers the birdcage tradition as an economic development strategy, promoting local e-commerce and tourism development (Fois et al., 2019). This reveals how the past is invented and staged for the present and the newly envisaged future of rural China.

Human–nature relationship

In contrast to Gillen et al.'s human-centered theorization, China's rural revitalization embodies a nature-oriented approach and harmonious human–nature relationship. The proposed rural revitalization is replete with a discourse of 'Green mountains and clear water are equal to mountains of gold and silver (绿水青山就是金山银山)'. This new official narrative marks an epoch which shifts from economic priorities towards an emphasis on green development placing economic growth and ecological protection on equal footing. The National Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization (2018–2022) further specifies the goals of incorporating ecological conservation, leisure, culture, production, and other functions into the development of a multi-functional countryside. Such new official narratives and plans embody a hybrid nature–culture view of rural revitalization, which neither separates/protects nature from human intervention nor embraces a determinist view of nature over human society. Instead, it aims to cultivate harmonious human–nature relationships during the ruralizing process.

How the hybrid nature–culture view of rural revitalization is put into practice is best illustrated by numerous field experiments of green development launched across different parts of rural China against the backdrop of state-led rural revitalization initiatives. How to achieve economic prosperity and poverty alleviation, while remaining sensitive to cultural tradition and human–nature harmony, is an important issue for the state, planners, investors, villagers, and other social actors involved in field experiments. The green development in the Yuanyang Rice Terraces (元阳梯田) has been a nationwide successful field experiment, which takes advantage of local natural and cultural resources and generates an innovative and sustainable ecosystem with the co-constitution of forests, villages, terraces, and rivers. Such harmonious human–nature approach in rural revitalization is also promoted as catering to the needs of local communities, and holding the potential for nurturing endogenous development and being applied elsewhere.

Towards inclusive geographies of ruralization

In testing Gillen et al.'s (2022) theorization of ruralization against China's geographical experiences of rural revitalization, we posit that the three geographies of ruralization in Southeast Asia are widely present in contemporary China. Southeast Asian ways of ruralization can serve as a reference point for understanding rural China's socio-spatial dynamics and vice-versa. Yet at the same time, China's most recent episode of ruralization generates alternative articulations, drawing attention to 'top-down' ruralization imperatives, uses of the past and harmonious human–nature relations during the ruralizing process. Such alternatives provide possibilities for appreciating the plural knowledge production on rural–urban relationality and forging an agenda towards more inclusive geographies of ruralization in the Global South and beyond (cf. Gkartziou et al., 2020). While this short intervention is insufficient for developing a fully inclusive analysis of ruralization and rural–urban relations, our hope is that it will stimulate more robust 'testing' and refinement of ruralization theory.

Data availability statement

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the first author upon request.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Ningning Chen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6777-0649>

Lily Kong  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4107-4762>

References

- Chio J (2017) Introduction: Rural as space and sociality. *Critique of Anthropology* 37: 361–363.
- Chung H (2013) Rural transformation and the persistence of rurality in China. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 54: 594–610.
- Fois F, Woods M, Yang Y, et al. (2019) Recovering tradition in globalising rural China: Handicraft bird-cages in Da'ou village. *Sociologia Ruralis* 59(4): 661–684.
- Ghosh S (2017) Notes on rurality or the theoretical usefulness of the not urban. *The Avery Review* 27: 1–11.
- Gillen J, Bunnell T and Rigg J (2022) Geographies of ruralization. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 12(2): 186–203.
- Gkartzios M, Toishi N and Woods M (2020) The language of rural: Reflections towards an inclusive rural social science. *Journal of Rural Studies* 78: 325–332.
- Kipnis A (2013) Urbanization in between: Rural traces in a rapidly growing and industrializing county city. *China Perspectives* 3: 5–11.
- Lin G, Xie X and Lv Z (2016) Taobao practices, everyday life and emerging hybrid rurality in contemporary China. *Journal of Rural Studies* 47: 514–523.
- Liu J, Zhang X, Lin J, et al. (2019) Beyond government-led or community-based: Exploring the governance structure and operating models for reconstructing China's hollowed villages. *Journal of Rural Studies*. DOI: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.10.038.
- Wong SW, Tang B and Liu J (2022) Rethinking China's rural revitalization from a historical perspective. *Journal of Urban History* 48(3): 565–577. DOI: 10.1177/0096144220952091.
- Woods M (2007) Engaging the global countryside: Globalization, hybridity and reconstitution of rural place. *Progress in Human Geography* 31: 485–507.
- Wu B, Liu L and Carter CJ (2019) Bridging social capital as a resource for rural revitalization in China? A survey of community connection of university students with home villages. *Journal of Rural Studies*. DOI: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.05.008.
- Xinhua. (2017). Dang de shi jiu da baogao shuangyu quanwen (The Bilingual Full-Text of the Party's 19th Congress Report), November 6. http://language.chinadaily.com.cn/19thcpnationalcongress/2017-11/06/content_34188086.htm. Accessed 4 December, 2022.
- Yan H, Bun KH and Xu S (2021) Rural revitalization, scholars, and the dynamics of the collective future in China. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48(4): 853–874.