

Article

China: A New Trajectory Prioritizing Rural Rather Than Urban Development?

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Abstract: The adverse effects of rapid urbanization are of global concern. Careful planning for and accommodation of accelerating urbanization and citizenization (i.e., migrants gaining official urban residency) may be the best approach to limit some of the worst impacts. However, we find that another trajectory may be possible: one linked to the rural development plan adopted in the latest Chinese national development strategy. This plan aims to build rural areas as attractive areas for settlement by 2050 rather than to further urbanize with more people in cities. We assess the political motivations and challenges behind this choice to develop rural areas based on a literature review and empirical case analysis. After assessing the rural and urban policy subsystem, we find five socio-political drivers behind China's rural development strategy, namely ensuring food security, promoting culture and heritage, addressing overcapacity, emphasizing environmental protection and eradicating poverty. To develop rural areas, China needs to effectively resolve three dilemmas: (1) implementing decentralized policies under central supervision; (2) deploying limited resources efficiently to achieve targets; and (3) addressing competing narratives in current policies. Involving more rural community voices, adopting multiple forms of local governance, and identifying and mitigating negative project impacts can be the starting points to manage these dilemmas.

Keywords: China; dilemmas; global leadership; national development strategy; policy implementation; rural revival and development; urban and rural development



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1. Introduction

Today, more than half the world's population lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 66% by 2050, and the number of cities in developing countries will have tripled by 2030 [1,2]. Large-scale urbanization has been happening autonomously and has been actively advocated by individuals, collective powers and states since the 19th century [3,4]. Cities are now the main centers for technology development, innovation, education, commerce, administration, transportation, medical care, human resources and more, and around 80% of global gross domestic product (GDP) is generated in cities [4,5]. Some urbanization researchers and proponents have argued that more than 99% of humans will live in cities by the end of this century and that the valuing and planning of rural areas should focus on urban needs [6,7]. Some even regard rural areas as places that are suitable only for growing crops and keeping livestock [8–10].

Despite the benefits of urbanization, it is the ecosystem, rural areas surrounding cities, and rural people who are paying for rapid development with environmental degradation and social inequities [11,12]. Under political pressure to satisfy urban residents—who now often form large and economically powerful blocks—central governments have favoured urban areas and urban populations at the expense of rural populations. This is evident in

suppressing prices of agricultural products, investing in urban industries and providing more generous and higher quality public services like transportation, health and education in cities [11,13]. Attracted by the higher income and greater opportunities that cities provide, and pushed by the growth of industrialized agriculture, many poor rural people migrate to urban areas temporarily or permanently as laborers [4,13,14]. However, these incoming rural people do not enjoy the benefits of city life as much as other urban dwellers. Although constituting nearly one-third of the urban population in developing regions (i.e., around 863 million), rural-to-urban migrants often live in slums or informal settlements, in housing that is usually non-durable, overcrowded, and without adequate clean water, health care, sanitation or social security [4]. People still living in rural areas also endure a harder life than urban residents [15–17]. Rural withering has been hard to stop, and many scholars are concerned about the future of rural areas, including such aspects as isolated farming communities [18,19], rural youth out-migration [20,21], farm land degradation [10,22], children and women left behind [21,23], limited access to resources and services [13,24], excessive construction and severe pollution [25], and vulnerability to disasters [26,27]. Obviously, supporting rural communities matters for achieving sustainable rural development.

As the country used to have the largest rural population in the world, China has enjoyed the great benefits but also the negative consequences of high-speed urbanization [1,28–30]. The GDP per capita has increased from 1,378 yuan in 1988 to 69,876 yuan in 2019, a 51-fold increase [31]. However, fast development is not always desirable because of its adverse outcomes, such as the increasing wealth gap [32,33]. Figure 1 shows that the annual average income gap between urban and rural residents is increasing; the income of urban residents (i.e., 42,359 yuan) in 2019 was 2.65 times that of rural residents (i.e., 16,021 yuan). Real estate sales support China's rapid urbanization [34] but at the cost of rapidly increased housing prices; the high-debt real estate market has become the largest 'grey rhino' in China [35]. Household debt by the end of 2018 in China was 60.4% of China's GDP, and the household debt-to-income was over 99.9% [36]. This high debt has raised concern from global investors at the risk of a credit crisis [37]. Moreover, cities have been epicenters of COVID-19 [38], and many scholars have proposed a review of urban design, planning and management to achieve a society more resilient to future pandemics and disasters [39,40]. Government commitments to ensure both rural residents' and rural-to-urban migrants' livelihoods and their aspirations for a better life during the process of rapid urbanization have been questioned [29,41–43]. Although the Chinese government has insisted on putting people at the center of their policies, some assessments find that governments have focused on stabilizing their power and gaining revenue by prioritizing land exchange, agglomeration, and development [29,44–46].

In light of the inertia of prioritizing urban areas, urban researchers emphasize the need for China to put more effort into protecting migrants when speeding up urbanization and citizenization (i.e., migrants gaining official urban residency) [29,48–50]. In September 2018, China published the *Strategic Plan of Rural Development (2018–2022)* ("the plan"), aiming to prioritize the development of rural rather than urban areas [51–53]. On top of this, the Rural Development Promotion Law was approved by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress [54] on 29 April 2021. The law is probably the first one in the world legitimating rural development with such a command-and-control policy instrument [55]. The policy change in China from favoring urbanization to favoring rural development has surprised many scholars [30,49,56–58], but critical analysis on why it happened is limited. Consequently, we address possible motivations behind this choice by addressing the following three questions:

- What are the possible strategies to revive and develop rural communities sustainably? (Q1)
- What socio-political drivers have led to China choosing to develop rural areas now? (Q2)
- What are the possible dilemmas, and how can China cope with them? (Q3)

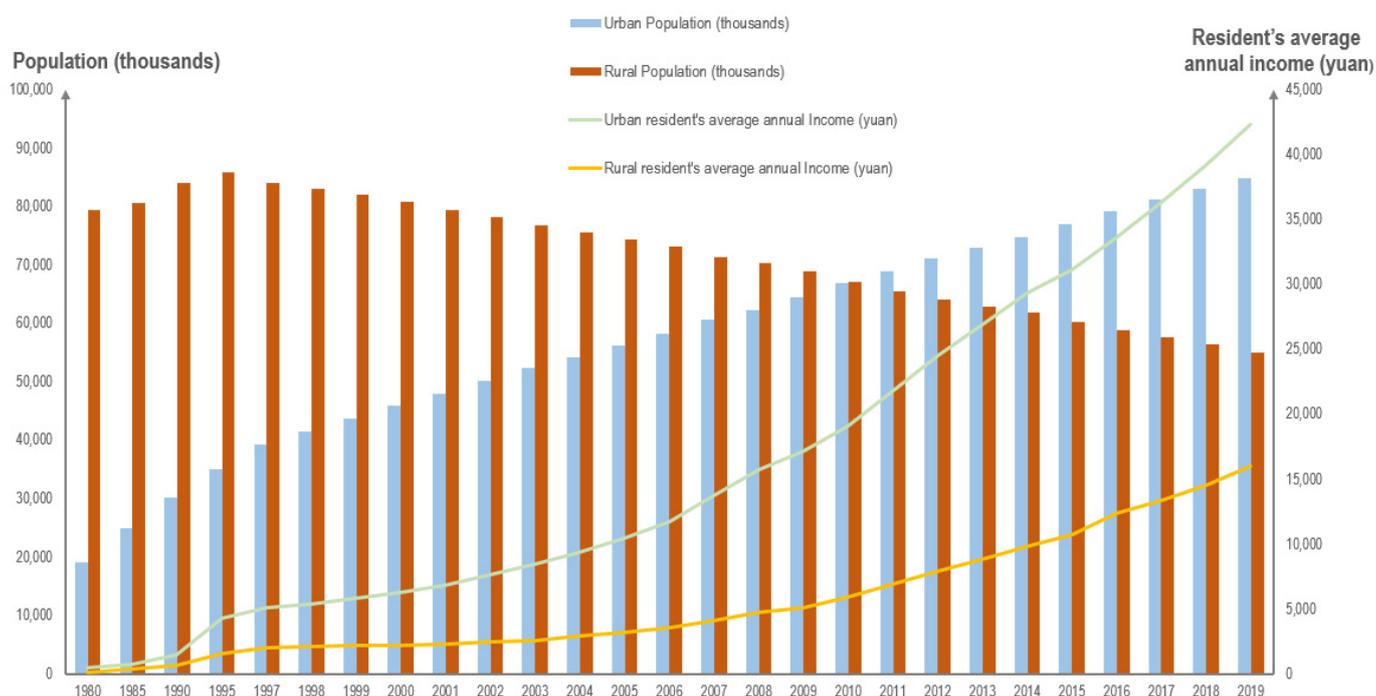


Figure 1. Population and income change of urban versus rural residents (Source: [47]).

2. Materials and Methods

To answer the above questions, this paper investigates the policy process of the plan by applying the three policy process theories, which are policy analysis, policy change via advocacy coalition framework, and implementation analysis [59]. To answer Q1, we conduct policy analysis by evaluating policy implications and options proposed by various scholars in international publications on sustainable rural development to understand past experiences and inform current decisions (Section 3.1) [59,60]. To answer Q2, we use the advocacy coalition framework to explore the socio-political drivers of China's choice to develop rural areas (Sections 3.2 and 3.3) [61–64]. To answer Q3, we discuss possible dilemmas and several feasible solutions and recommendations based on the determinants of success for policy implementation effectiveness outlined by Knill and Tosun (Section 4) [65].

Evidence used to support the above analysis is based on an extensive literature review of high-quality publications in English and Chinese and our field research in rural China from 2016 to 2020. Primary empirical data was collected by the authors' investigation on sustainable livelihood conditions of rural people subject to various projects in Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Chongqing, such as "beautiful countryside", dam-induced resettlement, poverty-alleviation resettlement, and agglomeration-of-villages (合村并居). Nine villages were visited and 56 rural residents were interviewed; these included peasants, migrant laborers, fishermen, restaurant owners, chefs, builders, small-business owners, cattle farmers, coffee planters, tea processors, chili planters, poets, and painters (more information can be found in the Supplementary Material Table S1).

The literature is reviewed in four steps. We first review the latest research discussing the impacts of urbanization and the further treatment of urban–rural relationships in the Web of Science Core Collection and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) (17 November 2020). The following search equation used: ("rural development" OR "rural revitalization" OR "rural vitality" OR "develop* rural" OR "rural revivification" OR "reviv* rural" OR "rural resurgence" OR "revitali* rural" OR "resurg* rural") AND (urban* OR urbanisation OR urbanization OR citizen* OR urban-and-rural OR urban-rural OR "integrat* urban and rural" OR "integrat* rural and urban"). Second, we summarize the main viewpoints of the treatment of urban–rural relationships, synthesize the traditional

trajectory of sustainably developing rural areas, and compare it with the new trajectory proposed by this case study [51]. Third, we examine the rationale of the new trajectory by assessing its design's suitability to China's current conditions by reviewing the latest journal articles, master's and doctoral theses, books, conference papers, and newspaper articles in the CNKI database (available at <https://cnki.net/>, accessed on 17 November 2020) from 2016 to 2020 via terms “乡村振兴”. In addition, we examine the arguments on agriculture and rural development by assessing the National Bureau of Statistics (available at <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/>, accessed on 11 April 2019), agriculture and rural development indicators from the World Bank (available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator?tab=all>, accessed on 11 April 2019), and land and agriculture data from the United Nations Statistics Division (available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/environment/Time%20series.htm#LandAndAgriculture>, accessed on 11 April 2019). Fourth, this study assesses the challenges of implementing the plan in practice based on available secondary empirical data. Secondary data, such as the strategic plan of rural development, the 19th Congress Report, and implementation of some policy interventions (i.e., poverty alleviation, beautiful countryside, and dam-induced resettlement) were obtained from a selection of available sources, including books, e.g., [41,66], environmental impact assessment reports, e.g., HEC [67], available on-line theses, e.g., Ding [68], five-year plans, e.g., [51,69], regulations, e.g., [70,71], news, e.g., [72–74], and journal articles available through Google scholar and CNKI, e.g., [75–78].

3. Results

3.1. Theory: Rural Withering and Three Future Scenarios for Urban–Rural Relationships

Rural “withering” is a negative outcome in countries with rapid or a high degree of urbanization [18,21,24]. This phenomenon involves poor rural education, children left behind as their parents work in cities, empty-nest elderly residents, poverty, powerlessness, and isolation [15,17,25,66,79–81]. Moreover, rural residents enjoy fewer public services and employment opportunities than urban residents [13]. Out-migration of rural residents to cities happens for employment opportunities, better education, and health care [20,25]. Urbanization may appear to be the ultimate destination of humanity, with one scenario for the end of the 21st century projecting that over 99% of people will be urbanites [7]. In China, the total number of villages has declined from 4.20 million in 1984 to 2.67 million in 2012, with 55,000 villages disappearing each year [81]. It seems that rural withering is unavoidable due to development, and rural residents need to be relocated [28]. To explore strategies on how to revive and develop rural communities sustainably (Q1), we summarized two scenarios that represent mainstream views and proposed a new one inspired by China's rural development strategy.

3.1.1. Scenario 1: Urbanization, De-Agrarianization, and Corporate and Entrepreneurial Farming

Viewpoint: Cities are in a predominant position, and rural areas are used for growing food [6–10].

In this scenario, urbanization and capitalist expansion, together with processes such as globalization and climate change, make de-agrarianization and de-peasantization (e.g., death of family farms) inevitable results of development [8,10,18,82]. Rural development is subordinate to urbanization, and policies aim to support sustainable transition or transformation from rural to urban lifestyles.

In rural areas, increasingly industrialized agriculture degrades the relationships between farming, nature, locality, and community and pushes rural people off their land to a marginal life in cities [10,14,21]. Additionally, few people live a peasant-like rural life because most non- or pre-capitalist forms of production no longer provide sufficient income or employment opportunities [10,21]. On the other hand, increasing urbanization reinforces non-farm growth rather than supporting slow-growing agriculture in rural areas, because non-farm growth can offer a pathway out of poverty for the rural poor with low capital

input and requires less government investment [25,83]. The proportion of the global population not producing food keeps growing, as does the number of middle- and high-income consumers of foods that are more energy- and greenhouse gas emission-intensive (e.g., meat consumption per capita is higher in urban areas) [83]. This demand requires more efficient agriculture supply chains, and land owned by the rural poor is not productive enough to meet demand chains [22,84]. As a result, policies for and investment in farming and agriculture are likely to support agrarian entrepreneurs geared to the demands of the market rather than local people [84–87].

3.1.2. Scenario 2: Urbanization, Rural Revitalization, and Re-Agrarianization

Viewpoint: Cities are still in the dominant position, but urban communities support the cultural relationships that rural people attach to their environments. Rural development is reoriented from productivism to multifunctionality [7,10,18,88,89].

In this scenario, living in cities is not the dream of all human beings, and cities cannot provide all needed and desired services to meet humanity's needs [7,90–92]. Specifically, annoyed by the crowded, noisy, and unhealthy urban lifestyles, increasing numbers of rural-to-urban migrants, or even urban residents, return to settle in rural areas to revitalize local agriculture, economy, and education [93]. In addition, increasing numbers of families choose to live in exurban areas to enjoy rural experiences despite their need to travel a longer distance to work every day [94]. They develop new forms of rural lifestyles [12,88,91,95,96]. Gradually, rural revitalization increases, as rural livelihoods entail more than simply growing crops or keeping livestock [97]: they are based on thousands of years of knowledge and experience of how people live with the land and nature, including knowledge of local farming, cultural landscape, language, customs, and arts [10,42,98]. Furthermore, small-scale, organic, or family farming can offer more choices than industrialized agriculture [10]. Thus, more attention, appreciation, and support is given to rural development, focused on the value of rural areas, including land consolidation, landscape use transition, rural tourism, food, heritage, and authentic products (i.e., a focus on quality) [89,99]. Peasant-like agricultural systems and lifestyles persist, despite the strong push of de-agrarianization and the movement toward corporate and entrepreneurial farming [100,101].

3.1.3. Scenario 3: The Traditional and the New Trajectories to Sustainably Develop Rural Areas

Viewpoint: Sustainable rural development should engage rural and urban communities in a united structure (Figure 2), where each of them can have comparable infrastructure and public services and can be equally attractive while representing different lifestyles.

Rural communities are withering as a result of urban development, and cities are becoming central to humanity as a result of globalization, industrialization, urbanization, and capitalist expansion [102]. Although some rural elements remain important for human development, the attitude to rural development may be limited to revitalization [99]. Vibrant rural communities seem destined to be a secondary objective rather than a priority in the context of urban development [10]. Thus, rural withering may be unavoidable, but more focus should be put on investigating how rural communities and rural-to-urban migrants can better serve urban needs while keeping their beneficial characteristics [32,93,103–107].

Is there any other new scenario that can solve this problem? We argue that Scenarios 1 and 2, following the traditional trajectory of sustainably developing rural areas, fail to consider urban and rural areas as a united system with the same development rights [76,108–111]. We suggest a new scenario, which entails developing rural areas as a new attraction while representing different lifestyles (Figure 2). For example, China aims for equality in sustainable development among rural and urban areas without sacrificing rural areas and communities [51,52]. Some urban scholars overlook the fact that dynamic processes exist between rural residents and rural-to-urban residents and consider that rural-to-urban migration is unidirectional [112]. As Van der Ploeg and Ye [41] point out, currently, Chinese

peasants have multiple roles: they are peasants during the growing and harvest seasons and migrant workers at other times. In 2017, more than 73.2% of peasant workers chose to work locally or in their province [113]. However, an estimated 286.5 million peasant workers in China in 2018 changed roles over time [113]. Push–pull powers co-exist, meaning that some people move from rural to urban areas, whereas others move in the opposite direction [112]. For example, an increasing number of migrants (e.g., 4.8 million in 2016 versus 4.4 million in 2015) have been returning to rural areas since 2012 [114–116].

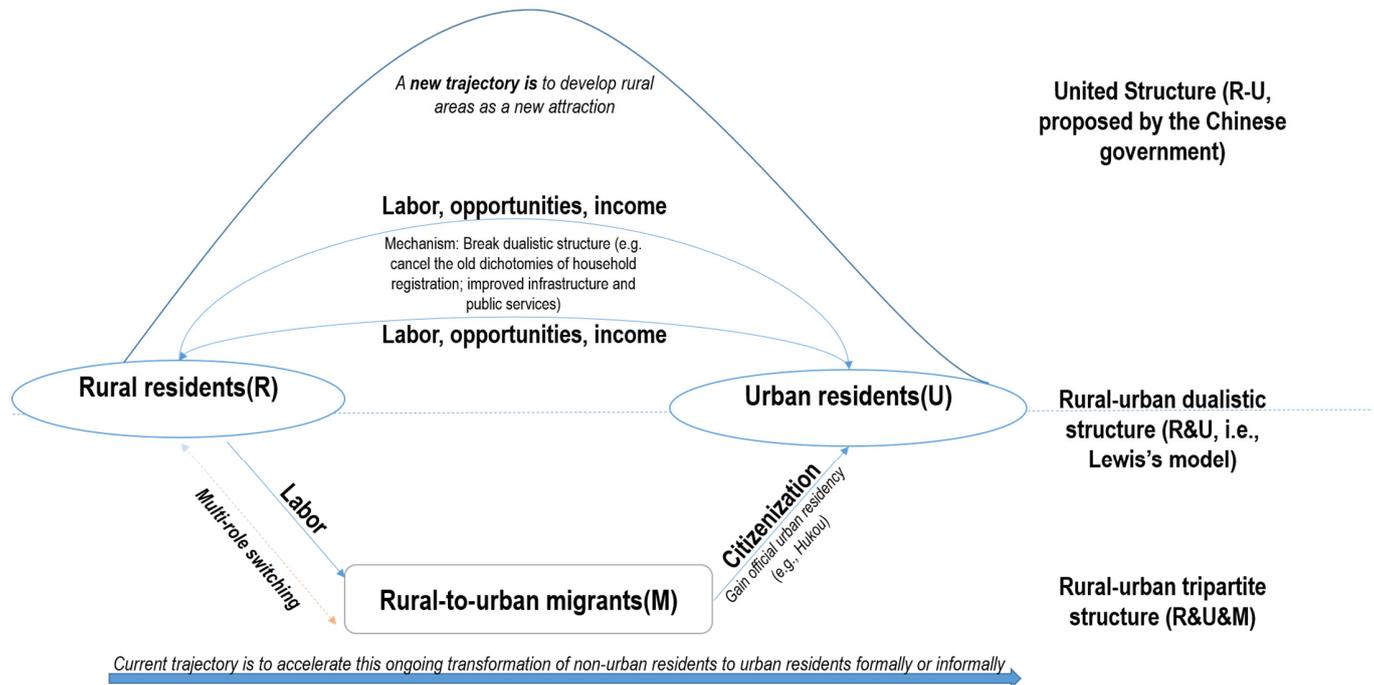


Figure 2. Trajectories to solve the negative impacts of rural development. Source: authors.

So, why do rural-to-urban migrants choose to work in, keep close contact with, or return to such an undeveloped, unproductive rural area with few employment opportunities, as Lewis [108] defined? We do not have all the answers but can conclude that rural areas may be as attractive as urban areas or that urban areas have become less attractive [117,118]. For example, in China, the attractiveness of urban areas for rural communities has declined since the mid-2000s because of fewer employment opportunities and a hard-to-access urban welfare system [116]. Instead, the attractions of rural areas could be home, families, friends, childhood, community, memories, beliefs, a sense of security, and other benefits [119].

By following the traditional trajectory and being trapped in Scenarios 1 and 2, concerns of “bad governance” raised in many studies indicate the poor performance of governments in managing the needs of rural residents and migrants [29,32,120]. However, most scholars favor urban development [84,121,122]. Urban researchers regard rural residents (i.e., the subsistence sector) as prospective underemployed laborers available to “serve” cities, and urban residents (see Figure 2) [109]. The aspiration for a better and happier life for people living in rural areas is the ultimate driver to push them to move to cities [14,29,50]. From this perspective, in China, a special group of people is emerging: rural-to-urban migrants who are not rural residents nor “qualified” urban dwellers [121,123]. They have become the new burden of urbanization [124]. Because it meets both the needs of urban and rural residents, the ultimate way to handle this group of people is to speed up citizenization [125], a process of changing the status of non-urban residents to urban residents (e.g., *hukou* 户口, official urban residency) or empowering non-urban residents with almost the same rights as urban residents when living in cities (e.g., *juzhuzheng* 居住证, temporary residency) [50,85,120,126]. By doing this, urban residents can enjoy more stable living conditions, free from the insecurity of migrants, while benefitting from cheaper

rural resources with modern and industrial agriculture [10,29,86,100]. Also, rural-to-urban migrants and potential migrants living in rural areas can enjoy a more prosperous life by living in cities, because small-holder farming in particular is no longer the best way to improve the income and livelihood of rural residents [85]. During this transition process, two groups of problems are emerging: problems caused by the flow of people from rural areas to cities [20] and the loss of people in rural areas [24]. For example, many scholars use Lewis’s model, which considers urban and rural areas as a dualistic structure (Figure 2), and follow the trajectory of urbanization-led success in development, to examine and assess the problems of urbanization, peasant workers, and rural residents [7,50,76,108,127–129].

By following the new trajectory, the following sections introduce why (Q2) and how (Q3) China seeks to sustainably develop rural areas.

3.2. China’s Rural Development Plan

In September 2018, the Chinese Government published the *Strategic Plan of Rural Development (2018–2022)* (“the plan”), aiming to prioritize the development of rural rather than urban areas in the next 30 years [51–53]. This means that by 2050, rural and urban areas could have the same infrastructure and public services (Figure 3) and be equally attractive while representing different lifestyles. One example is the Chinese reform of the household registration system (*hujizhidu* 户籍制度 or *hukou* 户口), which started in 2014 and committed to removing the old dichotomy of rural and non-rural residents by 2020 (Figure 2) [130,131]. In addition, China has put huge efforts into improving infrastructure and public services in rural areas (Supplementary Material Table S2). For example, over 96.7% of villages in China have been connected with sealed roads [51,132].

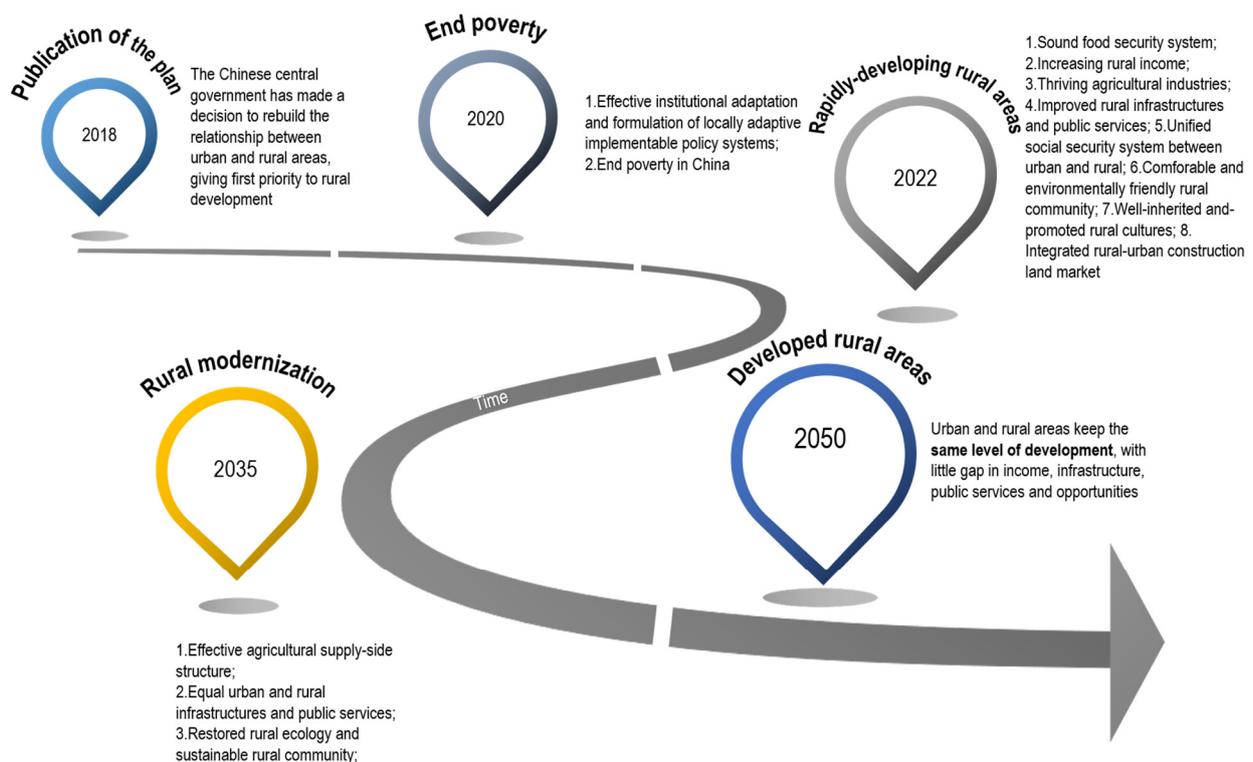


Figure 3. Milestones and goals of China’s rural development strategy. © authors (Source: State Council [51]).

In short, China is trying to rebuild the relationships between rural and urban areas in a new approach: unification, rather than transition. The plan sets four milestones and 22 goals (Supplementary Material Table S2) to help rural industries, ecological rehabilitation, and community development in rural areas, and achieve sustainable development goals [133–135]. The plan aims to help implement the latest national strategies, in particular,

the “China Dream” [136] and “Ecological Civilization” [137]. It also proposes to remedy existing problems and potential risks associated with rapid urbanization that have not been addressed in the National New-type Urbanization Plan [29,138].

While China’s rural development strategy is possible in theory, it will not be successful if it fails to be relevant to national or local contexts or lacks detailed planning for sound implementation [65]. To assess the strategy’s feasibility in practice, the socio-political drivers and deployment of the plan based on current Chinese socio-economic conditions (Section 3.3) and the challenges of implementing the plan in practice (Sections 4.1–4.3) are addressed below. Based on the identified challenges, several options to enhance the effectiveness of plan implementation will be discussed (Sections 4.4 and 4.5).

3.3. Socio-Political Drivers of the Plan

Public policies are shaped not by any single individual in a political system but by various complicated interactions among different actors within nested policy subsystems [61]. Policy subsystems describe the area and topical focus of policy issues of a political system within a geographic scope [139]; they are the primary unit of analysis of the advocacy collation framework [64,140]. By exploring the policy subsystems of a newly emerging issues with the application of the advocacy coalition framework, it is possible to better understand possible socio-political drivers and pathways of policy change [141–143]. The framework was developed by Sabatier and Weible [61] to assess “wicked” problems involving substantial policy change and competition among multiple actors. It has been applied to different political systems in many countries [61,140]. Rural and urban development in mainland China is the selected policy subsystem here.

To explore the socio-political drivers of the plan (Q2), we follow two critical paths—policy-oriented learning and external perturbation—in the framework to uncover China’s policy change from speeding up urbanization to developing rural areas [56,61,143]. Policy-oriented learning describes the enduring alterations resulting from policy feedback within the policy system, despite external perturbation and shocks, such as changes in socioeconomic conditions, disasters, and redistribution of resources, to the policy system [56,61]. By following the two paths, we identify five socio-political drivers (Figure 4) to discuss China’s choice of developing rural areas.

3.3.1. Ensuring Food Security

A food security system is needed while opening the Chinese domestic market to international markets, as illustrated by the effects of the US–China trade war and COVID-19 pandemic [56,144,145]. Facing the uncertainties and instability of international trade in agricultural products, such as blocked exports, decreased yield, and disrupted production cycles [146], China has set up a national food security strategy. This strategy has five requirements: being self-sufficient, fulfilling domestic demands, achieving high yield, reducing imports, and enhancing agricultural technology. For example, to maintain the quality and quantity of land, the plan has adopted the “red line of arable land”, with targets for protecting 120.0 million hectares of arable land, including 103.1 million hectares of cropland, before 2020, with another target for an additional 66.7 million hectares of high-quality cropland with advanced irrigation systems before 2022 [51,147].

3.3.2. Addressing Overcapacity

Infrastructure development in China has contributed significantly to economic growth since the late 1970s because it has helped export-led economic growth, attracted private and public investments, and provided employment opportunities [148]. However, fast growth and its dependence on infrastructure construction (*jijiankuangmo* 基建狂魔) [149] have led to investment in many types of infrastructure (e.g., road, railway, and telecommunication) and base products (e.g., steel) that exceed demand [150], inefficiencies that have detracted from rapid economic growth [151]. Moreover, the land financing strategy adopted by local governments has triggered more excessive infrastructure construction [151,152], especially

housing in “ghost cities” [50]. To stabilize its economy in response to declining exports due to the China–US trade war [153,154] and COVID-19 pandemic [155], China continues to invest in infrastructure construction [37,153–155]. Rural areas can be places for new investments in infrastructure and consume part of the infrastructure development and base products production overcapacity [156,157]. Consequently, rural areas can enjoy new and improved infrastructure, including roads, telecommunications networks, and dams, as well as improved public services, such as schools, hospitals, and village administration [157,158].

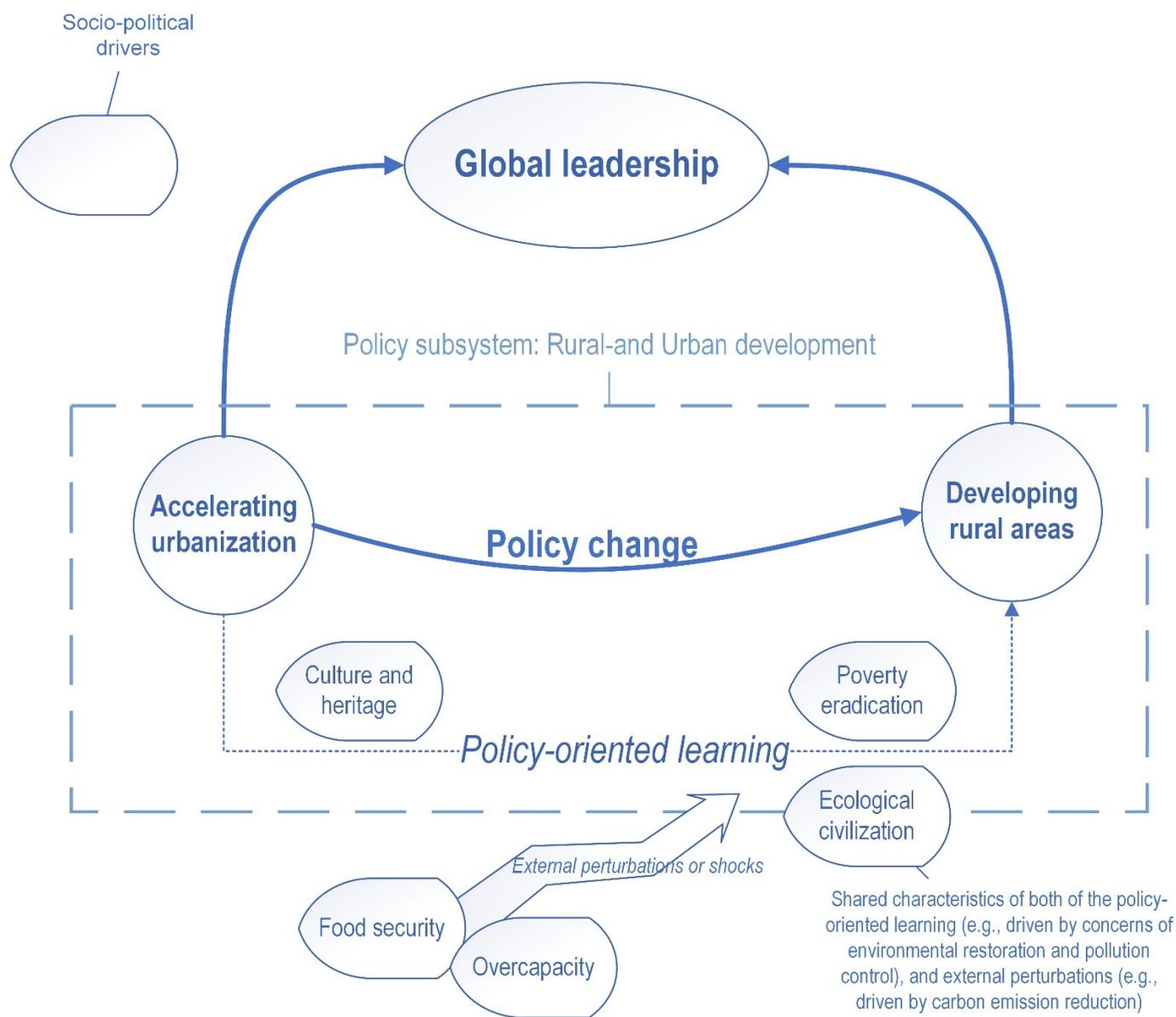


Figure 4. Policy change from accelerating urbanization to rural development and five socio-political drivers (Source: authors).

3.3.3. “Eradicating” Poverty and Enriching Rural Communities to Stabilize the Party’s Legitimacy

Long-term income inequality (Figure 1) and unequal development caused by rapid urbanization mean that most of the poor in China live in or come from rural areas, and they have become the main targets for policies to eradicate poverty [159,160]. More than 200 million people, mainly young and middle-aged adults, have migrated from rural areas [161]. This has resulted in a loss of high-quality land, land tenure insecurity, left-behind children (around 22 million), empty-nest elderly residents, and abandoned set-

lements [41,162]. As rural areas have been regarded by the Chinese Communist Party as the root of its legitimacy [163] since the 1930s, the emerging rural withering starts to threaten the party's legitimacy [164]. Consequently, investments to improve the livelihoods of rural communities enhance the party's legitimacy in rural areas and among the poor [132,165,166]. For example, with improved infrastructure, the number of villages selling agricultural products online, mainly via Alibaba (i.e., Taobao) and Pinduoduo, has increased significantly since 2009. From three villages in 2009, 3202 villages sold produce in 2018, contributing more than 28.53 billion yuan in domestic consumption that year [167,168]. Moreover, 357 out of 592 national-level counties in severe poverty are located in isolated regions, and their residents have relied greatly on e-commerce to sell their products [169,170]. Such achievements in poverty eradication were promoted by Xi Jinping on 25 February 2021 [171], emphasizing the party's contribution and consolidating its legitimacy.

3.3.4. Protecting and Building Cultural Heritage to Support "Great Rejuvenation"

China's rural development plan has also contributed significantly to support Xi Jinping's dream of "great rejuvenation" by adopting cultural heritage to project soft power [133,172]. Chinese history has been selected, constructed, and adjusted by the party since 1949 to achieve many political goals [173]. For example, the party has stabilized its power and united the nation by emphasizing China's five-thousand-year-old civilization [133]. The promotion of China's historical role as a global leader is used to gain current and future influence in global cooperation and competition [133]. Chinese history originated from farming culture along the Yellow and Yangtze rivers around 10,000 years ago [174,175]. Chinese beliefs, culture, and knowledge are rooted in rural areas; for example, the land and soil are regarded as the mother of all creatures in traditional Chinese culture [176,177]. In addition, Chinese rural communities have great diversity in ceremonies, architecture, customs, languages, lifestyles, arts and crafts, diets, and other cultural habits (Figure 5) [51,158]. Photos in Figure 5 show aspects of the rural cultural heritage of the Dai, Yi, Wa, Yi, and Miao people in Yunnan and Guizhou provinces. Most of these cultures are thousands of years old and thus have high cultural, social, economic, and ecological value. For example, the *Om Din* village (top right, bottom middle, and bottom left) is the last in China that maintains an aboriginal tribal culture [178], and *Bing An* (bottom right) is the largest collective village that retains extensive historic military, commercial, and transportation infrastructure [179]. Consequently, protecting rural cultural heritage can contribute to China's soft power and show the party's respect for the rights and interests of ethnic minorities.

3.3.5. Ecological Civilization as China's Green Deal

After Xi's speech stating that "lucid water and lush mountains are invaluable assets" (*lvshuiqingshan jiushi jinshanyinshan* 绿水青山就是金山银山) in the 19th National Congress Report in 2017, China has sought to become an "ecological civilization" as shown in Figure 6 [134,180], which could be understood as "environmental protection is of the utmost priority" [181,182]. Ecological civilization has been interpreted as sustainable development with Chinese characteristics [183,184], but few scholars have assessed the policy's contribution to support China's current and future global leadership by promoting efforts to conserve the earth [134,185]. "Ecological civilization" has formally been embedded in every Chinese development plan as a principle [185,186]; however, few researchers recognize that the concept has been embedded in rural reconstruction and development policies since 2007 [184]. Developing rural areas can improve the living conditions of rural residents and also contribute to China's international policy priorities [187,188]. For example, increasing vegetation coverage and transitioning to clean energy (Supplementary Material Table S2), as specified in the plan, are designed to contribute to China's climate change mitigation plans.



Figure 5. Rural areas maintain many aspects of the cultural heritage of China (photos© authors).



Figure 6. Government billboard promoting ecological civilization as China’s green deal to enhance the nation’s reputation and contribute to its global leadership (source© authors). Translation: Xi Jinping says: “Ecological civilization matters for China’s permanent development and great rejuvenation. Improved ecological conditions bring us a more civilized society. We are now facing severe stress on the way to achieving ecological civilization but I believe that China has the ability to sort out any challenges we meet.” (photo© authors).

4. Discussion

Intuitively, from a political perspective, the plan is designed to meet China’s political objectives domestically and bolster its aspirations for global leadership. The plan supports economic growth and maintains national security while respecting rural residents’ choices and protecting rural culture [101,189,190]. To safeguard its economic rise, China has to interweave its capital markets with global finance [165,191]. However, increasingly coupling with global financial markets may challenge the dominant role of the party. To consolidate the party’s central role in managing people and resources while opening China’s capital markets, a range of measures have been adopted [192] in areas such as food [193], domestic and global capital markets [194], supply chain [195], and censorship [196]. As we illustrated in Section 3.3, the policy change in China from favoring urbanization to favoring rural development can enhance China’s control of many policy problems while opening its capital markets [190,195,197].

However, developing rural areas requires the input of a great number of resources and changes existing institutional arrangements, which triggers new dilemmas [198]. Based on

our literature review and field work in rural China from 2016 to 2020, we find three main dilemmas in putting the plan into practice based on examining China's rural development experiences according to determinants of success for policy implementation effectiveness outlined by Knill and Tosun [65] (Q3).

4.1. Dilemma 1: Central Supervision Versus Decentralization in Policy Design

As a top-down authoritarian system, policies initiated by the central government always engage governments at provincial, municipal, and county levels in policy design [157,199]. Local governments are always required to react to the policies of the central government by developing and implementing relevant programs [200]. The central government needs to make sure the policies are implemented well through supervision [201]. However, there are gaps between national priorities and local interests, and many local governments will choose to react with inaction or even adversely [202,203]. Monitoring alone cannot reduce the odds of poor implementation, and it may increase the tendency to undertake token actions that meet targets required by higher authorities but create few social benefits [65]. Moreover, Knill and Tosun [65] point out that when specialized knowledge is needed to implement public policy, the more likely it is that local government implementers will have an advantage over central policymakers, resulting in deviations from the original policy.

For example, as one of the five socio-political drivers, poverty eradication policies in rural China appear to have been extremely successful. China has successfully lifted 730 million people out of extreme poverty since 1978, and the government declared that extreme poverty was eradicated by the end of 2020 [204]. However, the statistics for poverty eradication may not represent actual conditions in many areas of China, especially in "frontier" areas such as some villages in Yunnan Province [205]. An interviewed villager (P42) reports "local government officials hire their families and friends to disguise themselves as successful people who used to live below the poverty line and are now out of poverty". Other forms of poor governance include local government officials who allocate poverty eradication funds to family and friends rather than to people enduring serious poverty; diverting the funds meant for poverty eradication to other projects, where they may get kickbacks; submitting a false number of local residents' applications for income; and failing to develop local projects and instead distributing the money directly to the poor [206,207].

Unfortunately, implementation of the concepts of ecological civilization [184,208], beautiful countryside construction [209], and agglomeration of villages [210,211] to develop rural areas have often involved the demolition and reconstruction of villages. For example, the agglomeration of villages has seen local governments merging rural villages, relocating residents to apartments, and selling land for revenue [212]. This agglomeration was first undertaken in the 1990s in southern coastal areas to stimulate urbanization (Han and Zhang 2012) and was later adopted by the Shandong Provincial Government for rural development [213,214].

Without enough allocated resources, "one size fits all" standards are often applied by the implementers to cope with the demands of higher authorities [201]. Large amounts of funding were directed to advertising and uniform urban features, like rebuilding streetlights and refurbishing bus stops, under the "Beautiful China" scheme [215]. In many regions, ethnic culture conservation has been simplified into redecorating buildings and residents' houses in a "minority" style [216–218]. For example, the Ximeng county government has reconstructed roofs and exterior walls since the early 2010s (Figure 7) but has not supported the beliefs and other cultural aspects of the Wa people (Figure 5) [219–221]. In addition to the Wa people, the cultures of other ethnic groups have been diminished, such as the Lahu, Yi, and Dai people in southwestern China [172,222,223].

4.2. Dilemma 2: Restricted Resources

Even if some local governments are willing to implement policies, they may lack the human, financial, technical, and organizational resources to implement them effectively.

As an example, the Guizhou province has introduced an e-commerce project involving nine townships and 106 villages; however, 13.73 million yuan of the poverty reduction fund is unused due to the lack of practical plans and insufficient e-commerce skills [73]. Similar situations are reported in many other villages, which have failed to select suitable development initiatives [224].

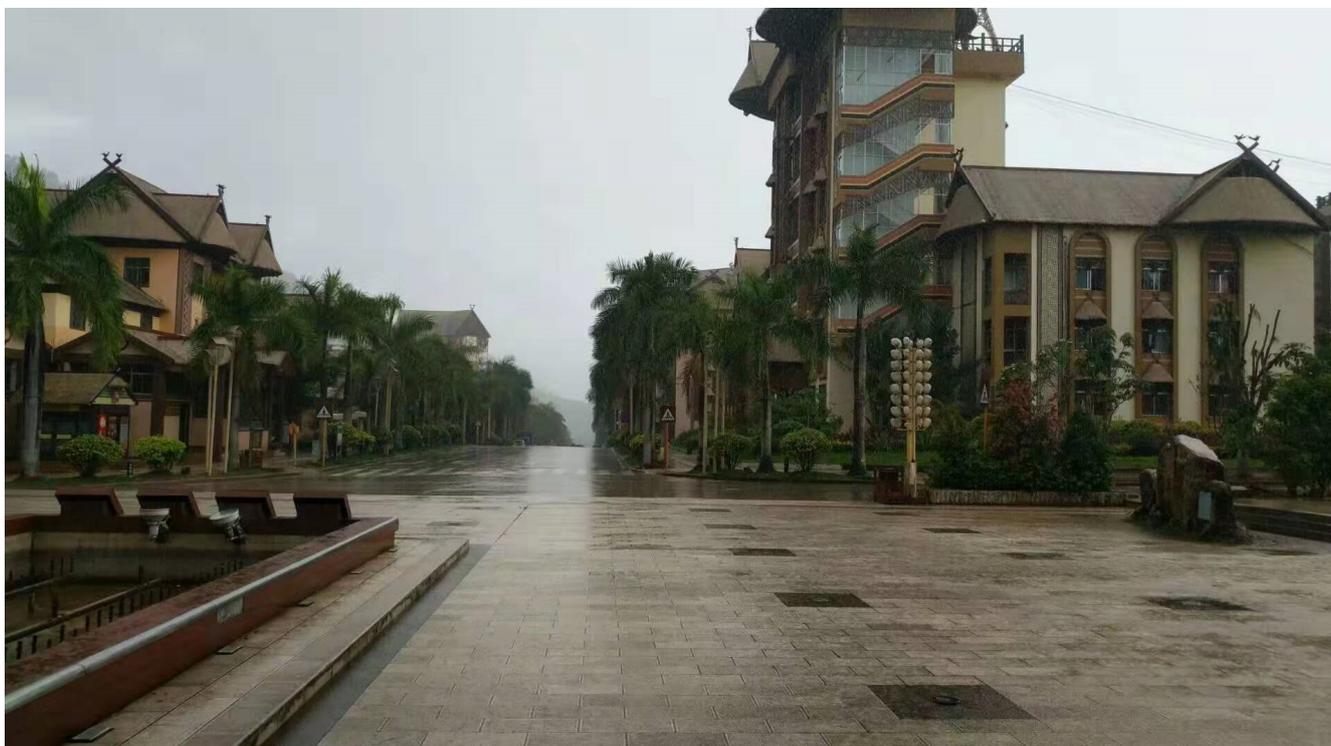


Figure 7. Ximeng County reconstructed roofs and exterior walls with characteristics of the Wa people’s culture (photo© authors).

In addition, expert support for investment is insufficient in many villages, so many poor decisions are made that have adverse impacts [57,225]. Hou and Lin [226] report failures that have occurred in some villages when implementing the plan. Rural communities’ voices are often not taken seriously, and many useless projects have been funded. Local rural developments are often designed by urban companies who ignore the difference between urban (i.e., recreation) and rural (i.e., production) land functions. Some local governments have implemented ambitious plans but recognized that they were not feasible only after investing huge amounts of money [57,227,228]. In some villages, developments have removed common-pool resources collectively owned by all villagers, such as savings, pasture land, and forest [229]. Moreover, the pressure on officials implementing such a complex and ambitious policy may cause other unpredictable impacts. For example, China in 2014 set up “win-win” goals of adding more than 10 GW solar photovoltaic systems in poor rural areas by 2020 to eradicate rural poverty and transition to low-carbon energy [227,228]. However, this plan has not reduced poverty but instead has increased local corruption and accelerated land disputes in many regions due to poor planning and a lack of transparency and accountability [230–233]. In addition, most officials working on the ground to reduce poverty work excessive overtime, to the point that some officials have died since 2017 due to overwork [234]. The capacity to develop implementable plans at the local level is thus a major challenge.

To cope with limited natural and human resources, displacement and resettlement have been used by the Chinese government to more efficiently use infrastructure, public services, and human resources [235] and to achieve ambitious environmental goals [236] like carbon emission reduction, forest restoration, and watershed protection [230,237–239].

Although resettlement is an efficient approach to accomplish goals, resettlers commonly become impoverished after relocation and suffer from loss of land and homeland; unemployment; physical, social and psychological marginalization; disease; food insecurity; loss of common resources; and the disintegration of social structure [240,241]. In some poorly managed resettlements, impoverishment and disintegration of social structures have impacted not only the resettlers but also the broader population [236,242].

“Move out, resettle and get rich” (*bandedu, wendezhu, nengzhifu* 搬得出, 稳得住, 能致富) is a slogan widely used during the displacement and resettlement process, and it illustrates the core aim of improving resettlers’ livelihoods [181]. However, the livelihoods (not to mention happiness and wealth) of many people who used to work as peasants are hard to recover after resettlement—even though they may be living in a new house—due to the loss of natural assets (like arable land and firewood from forests), lack of access to common property resources, and the loss of human assets (i.e., work-related knowledge and skills) [180,240,243]. Local environment protection actions in some areas, like Yunnan province, further diminish original income sources, like fishing, sand excavation, and gathering mountain products (e.g., herbs, mushrooms, and nuts), with little or no compensation in some cases [180].

4.3. Dilemma 3: Competing Narratives

Policies are interventions to influence management within a distributed system without encoding everyone’s behavior or specifying every activity [244] and narrative in policies matters; these interventions can include guiding actions and the influencing of policy changes [245]. Competing narratives may disable policies or even cause a backlash against the original intention [244,246,247]. China’s governance can be regarded as a distributed system with a central governing apparatus and subordinate local governance, as explicitly shown by its five-year plans [199,248,249]. Policy objectives, such as energy generation and carbon emission reduction, are adopted by the central government and then delegated to lower-tier authorities to implement [248,250]. Governing through a distributed system can help the Chinese central government achieve its targets, but yawning gaps between political intentions and actual outcomes are common [199,248,251,252].

We find some competing narratives in this plan, which have been downplayed. For example, the plan aims to manage mountains, water, forests, wetlands, grasslands, and agricultural lands holistically, but this strategy fails to consider a range of conflicts and trade-offs among these objectives [57,134,180]. For example, restoring grasslands and forests will be achieved by diminishing farming communities’ access to agricultural lands [253,254]. Reducing desertification by planting trees will exacerbate water scarcity downstream [255–257]. In other cases, the plan may reinforce former and ongoing practices that have paid too much attention to targets and quotas, such as the number of relocated households and the size of enclosed grasslands and rangelands [181,231,258,259]. Rather than improving local communities’ livelihoods and conserving water and forest or grasslands, reliance on binding environmental and social targets has triggered many undesirable practices. These include the use of unreliable data, corruption in local governments, and inadequate monitoring of implementation by lower levels of authority [199,246].

In addition, the industry upgrading and technological innovation favored in this policy rely on upgraded infrastructure, which may place greater pressure on the species and people affected [134,260]. For instance, rural tourism is now attracting capital to develop many rural villages. To entice more tourists, villages need to provide comfortable living and traveling conditions by constructing new infrastructure such as highways, bridges, boardwalks, and parks and by improving existing infrastructure such as roads, drainage systems, and telecommunication systems [69,261]. Although the principles in the plan emphasize that the process of rural development should be undertaken in a sustainable and environmentally friendly manner, limited measures have been adopted to manage potential negative environmental impacts. The development of new infrastructure, like roads (especially highways), dams, and irrigation systems, keeps posing high risks for the

environment [56]. The Chinese government has set high standards, including ecological red lines. However, these policies have not successfully transformed on-ground practices due to coordination challenges among different departments and across regions [134,262–264].

The idea of ecological civilization seems to be a solution to this dilemma of competing narratives [134,265]. It is also an approach that meets national and international expectations. Yet it is hard to achieve because it assumes that rural communities' livelihoods and well-being will be enhanced after improving ecological conditions [180]. Many people's livelihoods and well-being will not be improved with environmental restoration but rather will be threatened due to loss of land, unemployment, and other impacts [134,180]. Furthermore, ecological civilization has been criticized as authoritarian environmentalism that sacrifices the interests of some groups to benefit vested interests and the broader society [182,185,187].

4.4. Policy Implications

Considering these shortcomings, this plan can be improved and better implemented. Here we propose three policy responses to cope with the dilemmas facing sustainable rural development in China (Q3).

4.4.1. Rural Community Voices Need to Be Taken More Seriously

Local governments would obtain benefit from respecting communities' voices and rights and involving Indigenous and local knowledge wherever possible [57,172,266]. While anticipating public demands, local agents need to design effective, locally adaptive policies, improve the efficiency of resource use, and avoid investing in unnecessary projects [227,230,231,267,268]. From our field experiences in villages, we found that most rural people have clear views about how to develop their rural industries, but their views are seldom considered by local policy implementers. As one interviewee, P(2), said, "I told them not to continue to distribute nuts seedlings and force us to plant them . . . No one harvests them . . . Nuts are not suitable for our location . . . Nowadays, see the abundant water resources, ecological fish cultivation should be promoted . . . They don't listen; gradually, I don't want to talk anymore . . .".

Failures to take rural communities' voices into account may be due to the ineffective design of the consultation system, which in most cases is via regular formal meetings in villages or among villagers. One female villager, P(36), said, "I am afraid and don't want to speak at the meetings, whatever I say doesn't make any sense . . . If I am speaking something scrambled, the leaders will be unhappy . . . Everyone talks well at the meetings, but that's too boring. Gradually I don't even go to the meetings at all . . . If they come to my home like you and sit with me and talk informally, I think I'd like to say more things". Although the importance of community voices is well recognised by the central government, the actual practices on the ground are still too formal and one-dimensional to gather and effectively evaluate multiple voices in a community [158,269,270]. We suggest that the central government may encourage local governments to design two-way, multi-form and locally adaptive information gathering systems (e.g., internet forms, home visits, informal meetings) [271–273] to gather information from the voices of different groups of villagers; this may help to make locally adaptive policies to instruct rural development more easily and effectively [274–277]. If this is effective, then more local participatory planning initiatives and institutional interaction—e.g., with government oversight from higher levels (to ensure coordination and a lack of cumulative negative impacts)—could be piloted to empower rural residents and their rural development dreams [225].

4.4.2. Multiple Forms of Governance Need to Be Adopted Together

Despite institutional constraints, the Chinese central government has the capacity to effect changes in a complex policy environment; as an example, there are five levels of government (national, provincial, municipal, county level, and township level) and over twenty institutions at each level [246,248]. Therefore, more institutional interactions [225],

including government reorganization or coalitions and government-business alliances [278], are needed to create or modify (e.g., simplify, combine, or compress) policy subsystems, thereby improving implementation effectiveness [65,279,280]. However, it will never be easy to innovate or challenge existing institutional arrangements or all those who prosper under the old order [281]. Establishing independent arbitration organizations or departments (e.g., the Hai He River Basin Commission) may be effective for carrying out specific large-scale and cross-boundary projects, which are generally mandated by the State Council, funded by large amounts of money and which concern many people; however, these cannot break existing boundaries in the administration systems (i.e., upper level vs. lower level), especially on universal social issues [200,281]. In addition, some existing governing practices, such as the rural revival in Hebei Province [106] and community market management in Beijing [282], provide good examples of working across boundaries in the current system. This bottom-up governance or participatory governance practice solves many long-lasting problems by entrusting communes with the power to “instruct” higher authorities to solve problems that cannot be solved by the original top-down system [106,158,280]. It can deal with unclear authority and overlapping institutions and further increase the transparency and accountability of the administration system [283]. However, how applicable this single case is to the rest of China is unknown [198].

4.4.3. Negative Impacts Need to Be Identified before Initiation

China has negatively impacted the environment through rapid economic development since the 1980s and is now aiming to accomplish “modernization” and “great rejuvenation” at a tremendous speed [133,284–286]. However, we argue that the development pace in some areas, like environmental protection and poverty alleviation, may be too fast to avoid or mitigate some of the negative impacts [180,278,287,288]. A villager, P(47), we interviewed said “... the sudden and mandatory rigid environmental protection actions stop many construction projects, mining projects, and many other projects. However, these projects are the major sources of income for many rural residents, especially those who lost their land. Many people including me made a living as migrant workers ... Many horrible things happened in my village and a lot of other nearby villages, people were killed, robbed, raped ... The society is at risk and is backward. All these due to their income being not as stable as before”.

Rural tourism has long been believed to be a catalyst for reviving rural areas and the local economy [288–290], and it is being adopted by almost all villages as a major approach to accomplishing sustainable rural development and alleviating poverty [229]. However, rural tourism is not a panacea for sustainably developing all rural areas, as thought by many local governments, because not all rural areas are attractive or potentially profitable enough as potential tourist attractions [287–289]. As Zheng [78] notes, in some villages, rural tourism starts rapidly but also decays swiftly because of a lack of new programs to attract tourists, inadequate infrastructure to support sustainability, and no proper regional planning and management processes [287]. In addition, many local governments in China have perceived rural tourism as a sightseeing development and paid little attention to the conservation and exploitation of heritage and Indigenous culture [78,291,292]. For example, in some traditional villages in Guizhou province, historic buildings are being demolished, making all residents’ houses uniform and investing in unnecessary construction due to development without adequate consideration and planning [285,286].

Negative impacts as specified above are not identified, let alone mitigated, as there is no provision for strategic (environmental) impact assessments [293–295]. In contrast, the benefits brought by some rural development activities, such as rural tourism, have been exaggerated [287,296]. The State Council [297] has recognized this and initiated the Interim Regulations on Major Administrative Decision Process (IRMADP) to limit the negative impacts of administrative decisions; this legislation was effective from 1 September 2019. We therefore suggest that the Chinese government completes its strategic assessment

system and accelerates its process to initiate impact assessments before making major decisions, especially on the policies that have broad and significant effects, like the plan.

4.5. Contributions, Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Although we have responded to the research questions, this paper cannot uncover all possible approaches to supporting sustainable rural development, all possible socio-political drivers and policy subsystems behind China's rural development strategy, and all possible challenges in implementing this strategy. Other perspectives may also bring different insights. For example, Schwab [5] proposes that we are now entering the Fourth Industrial Revolution, fundamentally changing the world we are living in through advanced technology [298]. Social innovation has been regarded by many scholars as an approach to develop or revive rural areas [299–302] and to support rural communities [303–305]. Will the rural development strategy proposed by the Chinese government be a milestone in social innovation [306]? Or will China's rural development strategy and the Fourth Industrial Revolution increase the power of the Internet of Things or digital transformation to make positive or negative social changes in a complex environment [307,308]? Or is the rural development strategy a further step towards digital authoritarianism with improved infrastructure [309–311]? These questions are relevant to the second research question but need further and more in-depth research to answer.

Despite the imperfect analysis, this paper makes three major contributions to the literature. First, we summarize two future scenarios and propose a new one of sustainable rural development. In short, China's rural strategy represents a new trajectory of sustainable rural development that engages rural and urban communities in a united structure (Figure 2), where they can have comparable infrastructure and public services and be equally attractive while representing different lifestyles. Second, we uncover the motivations of China to consolidate and extend its global leadership. In addition, we identify five socio-political drivers behind China's choice—food security, culture and heritage, overcapacity, environmental protection, and poverty eradication—of supporting rural areas by connecting this strategy with current social and economic issues. Third, we assess the feasibility of this strategy based on the latest publications and our fieldwork, summarize policy dilemmas, and provide three response options. Significantly, the arguments we made are not only based on the literature but also our fieldwork, providing detailed empirical evidence. Such extensive and multidisciplinary knowledge that is also synthesized has not been found in available publications. Lessons from the design and implementation of China's rural development strategy may benefit other countries or regions that aim to revive or develop rural areas. These three contributions open a window to scholars interested in rural, urban, and China studies and provide evidence for policymakers contemplating further reform.

If the Chinese Government can successfully address the dilemmas that we have identified, this may limit the negative impacts of rapid urbanization by 2050 rather than 2100. Chinese experiences in rural development can help to expand our assessment of rural and urban relationships beyond the two traditional scenarios summarized in this paper. Rural withering is a reality in many places around the world, raising the question of how to protect rural culture. Should we urbanize most people in “smart” cities and protect rural culture in museums by following the path of Scenario 1? Or should we revitalize and protect rural areas and culture in situ following the path of Scenario 2? Or should we start to think like the Chinese government and embed rural development in overall development plans? Future research could validate or evaluate our findings by developing broader comprehensive analysis such as regression analyses on overcapacity and rural infrastructure investment. More in-depth assessments of the implementation of China's rural policies could also provide invaluable experiences and lessons for supporting sustainable rural development around the world.

5. Conclusions

Inspired by China's latest rural development plan, this paper summarizes two future scenarios for developing rural areas and finds a new one for building resilience to pandemics, limiting the negative impacts of rapid urbanization, and developing rural areas sustainably; that is, reimagining development as a synergistic and dynamic process rather than a dualistic or tripartite structure.

The change in China from policy favoring urbanization to favoring rural development has surprised many scholars, and this paper uncovers China's domestic political objectives, namely food security, culture and heritage, overcapacity, environmental protection, and poverty eradication, which bolster its aspirations for global leadership.

To develop rural areas sustainably, China needs to effectively resolve three dilemmas: (1) implementing decentralized policies under central supervision; (2) deploying limited resources efficiently to achieve targets; and (3) addressing competing narratives in current policies. Involving more rural community voices, adopting multiple forms of local governance, and identifying and mitigating negative project impacts can be the starting points to manage these dilemmas. In addition, Chinese governments may still need detailed implementation plans to deal with the complexities and trade-offs in the governance of rural and urban, conservation and development, and monitoring and autonomy.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/land10050514/s1>, Table S1: Interviewee list of the visited villages, and Table S2: Five aspects of China's rural development and 22 goals in the Strategic Plan of Rural Development (2018–2022).

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