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Who Owns the Rural Space? The Social Contradictions Between Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Native Individuals Under China's Rural Revitalization

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Abstract: China's rural revitalization strategy has led to the emergence of a new group of immigrant entrepreneurs. As they manage industries in villages, social contradictions with the native individuals inevitably arise. To reveal the social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals, this study constructs a framework based on social conflict theory and employs a qualitative approach combining methods such as participative observation and unstructured interviews with immigrant entrepreneurs, native individuals, and village officials in Xian Village. Key findings reveal the following: (1) Disparities in lifestyle, entertainment methods, and commercial interests are the main factors contributing to the social contradictions. (2) The presentation of contradictions is summarized in three forms: the segregation of production space, the emergence of interest groups, and the outbreak of intermittent conflicts. (3) Although these contradictions seem to be part of everyday life and self-regulating, with the favoritism of local governments, the power network of the village is further eroded by immigrant entrepreneurs, and native individuals are faced with the risk of being marginalized, which seems to be a tricky phenomenon in the process of rural revitalization. These findings summarize the causes and localized presentation forms of social contradictions, enhance the applicability of social conflict theory, and supplement valuable cases from developing countries.

Keywords: rural revitalization; rural space; native individual; immigrant entrepreneur; social contradiction; security

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Academic Editors: Hadas Shadar and Irit Amit-Cohen

Received: 25 January 2025
Revised: 11 February 2025
Accepted: 12 February 2025
Published: 17 February 2025

Citation: Meng, W.; Wang, H.; Wang, S. Who Owns the Rural Space? The Social Contradictions Between Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Native Individuals Under China's Rural Revitalization. *Land* **2025**, *14*, 420. https://doi.org/10.3390/land14020420

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1. Introduction

Urbanization is an inevitable facet of human civilization's development. However, within the trajectory of urbanization, the stagnation of rural development presents an insurmountable challenge. Some developed countries have deployed rural revitalization initiatives to counter rural recessions caused by urbanization; examples include One Village One Product in Japan, the New Village Movement in South Korea, Village Renewal in Germany, and Land Consolidation in The Netherlands [1–4]. Analyzing these cases, it becomes clear that multifunctionality has become an important concept within rural development, and the customary way to implement this concept is to introduce urban capital into the village to operate various industries under the initiative of the government [5]. When urban capital moves into the countryside, it would lead to the rise of "immigrant entrepreneurship" and the emergence of "immigrant entrepreneurs" in rural areas [6].

Defining immigrant entrepreneurs may be an onerous task: An immigrant is generally defined as a person who has relocated to a new place, other than that of his/her usual residence, and resided there for an extended period [7]. Immigrant entrepreneurship, typically understood as the engagement of immigrants in entrepreneurial activities, has become a significant socio-economic phenomenon today [8]. For this study, the term immigrant entrepreneurs refers to immigrants who have registered companies (economic organizations with legal personality and subject to government supervision) and engage in various entrepreneurial activities in their place of residence [9]; they often face fierce competition, small profit margins, and limited growth prospects [10].

Immigrant entrepreneurship is the product of the flow of social capital from urban to rural areas [11]. This phenomenon occurs not only in developed countries, but also in developing countries, and one of the most typical is China [12]. With the process of rural revitalization, entrepreneurs from cities are starting to invest in rural areas, and most of them are involved in the cultural and tourism sectors, including catering, homestays, and clubs [13]. In practice, this process is not smooth sailing, especially when private enterprises representing a new type of productivity enter villages. With this acknowledged, there have been precious few advances in our understanding of this issue. This paper aims to contribute positively by addressing this gap in the existing literature, with the intention of sharing valuable experiences and lessons from similar villages in internationally related areas. More specifically, it seeks to explore two key questions: First, what causes the social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals? Second, what are the forms in which these contradictions present themselves? To address these questions, we integrate insights from the literature with findings from extensive fieldwork conducted in Xian Village.

2. Literature Review

In light of the unique focus of this study, we will conduct a brief literature review for the relationship between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals in rural areas, including Chinese local research and some international studies.

The relationship between immigrants and native individuals has been a prominent topic in the field of social science since the age of the Great Voyages. Although Ralph Waldo Emerson proposed the ideal type of 'Great Melting Pot' [14], reality differs. A review of previous studies reveals that different perspectives between immigrants and native individuals can lead to social contradictions that ultimately damage community cohesion [7], and the process of resolving these contradictions, from generation to outbreak, is usually a prolonged and complex process [15]. From the perspective of the factors contributing to these social contradictions, differences in production between immigrants and native individuals lead to disputes over the allocation of public resources [16]. When immigrants who once lived in different cultural settings enter a new environment, achieving full cross-cultural integration in a short time is challenging. Therefore, the difference in living customs between them and native individuals has also become a significant factor contributing to social contradictions [17]. Additionally, native individuals often have a strong attachment to their natural environment and may even engage in natural god worship [18]; therefore, the destruction of the natural environment by immigrants is also likely to trigger collective protests by native individuals [19].

Other studies have attempted to illustrate the forms of presentation of social contradictions: the intensification of social contradictions between immigrants and native individuals tends to be gradual rather than abrupt. This process continuously evolves from everyday life to public politics, and often has the potential to escalate into larger conflicts if village authorities lack the necessary mediation experience [20]. Additionally,

some studies have found that the forms of conflict often reflect local characteristics, closely linked to regional social traits. For instance, in communities where people have a strong sense of law, conflicts typically occur within established and sanctioned legal frameworks (such as structured negotiation and the court system) [21]. In contrast, in some religious communities, conflicts are resolved through rituals or collective ceremonies [22].

In summary, the factors that lead to the social contradictions between immigrants and native individuals are complex and diverse, and their manifestations and evolutionary processes are largely constrained by local characteristics. This underscores the necessity of focusing on local research. Despite the international community's fruitful research on this subject, their attention to rural China is still insufficient. Similarly, most local studies in China assess the benefits and drawbacks of village government governance at the national level, lacking research on the essence of these contradictions. This study takes Xian Village in Nanjing as a case study, paying special attention to the mechanism and evolution of social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals during the process of rural revitalization.

3. Theoretical Framework

Conflict is an important social trend in contemporary sociology and political science. It coexists with social changes and witnesses the survival and extinction of certain ethnic groups [23]. Compared with other theoretical frameworks of conflict, the social conflict theory places a stronger emphasis on guiding social practice through theoretical frameworks. In other words, the social conflict theory framework is good at explaining various conflict phenomena within social systems from a micro perspective and exploring their specific forms and functions. Although some criticisms have pointed out that the explanation of the social conflict theory at the macro level is insufficient [24], the social conflict theory neglects the fundamental cause of class interest struggle [25], and it struggles with addressing structural societal issues [26], it should be acknowledged that the social conflict theory underscores the importance of understanding the multifaceted nature of social interactions [27], and offers theoretical frameworks that can explain the complexities of conflict and cooperation in various contexts. In order to discover the social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals, this study constructs a concise theoretical framework drawing on two key findings from social conflict theory: causes and form of presentation.

First, within the framework of social conflict theory, social contradictions refer to the antagonisms and disputes that arise among different social groups due to factors such as interests, power dynamics, and the distribution of resources [28]. These contradictions can exist at the economic level, the political level, and the cultural level, etc., [29–32]. In this study, there are significant differences between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals in areas such as economic status and educational attainment. As a result, social contradictions between these two groups are complex and shaped by multiple influencing factors, these contradictions require specific analyses in conjunction with empirical data. Second, the forms of presentation of social contradictions have distinct local characteristics. This means that the forms of contradictions between different groups vary, and researchers must conduct specific analyses based on case studies [33]. Moreover, social contradictions are, to some extent, latent. They do not directly manifest as antagonistic conflicts but often exist in the form of latent conflicts [34]. When antagonistic behavior ceases, if social contradictions are not entirely resolved, conflicts will transition into a latent phase. In this study, social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals exhibit the characteristics of long-term latent conflicts coexisting with brief antagonistic

conflicts. Both types show notable rural traits. From a more micro perspective, social contradictions demonstrate different details in varying social contexts.

Immigrant entrepreneurs who move industries from cities to rural areas represent a new group in China, and their integration into the rural social system may lead to various social contradictions with native individuals. We seek to understand the forms of social contradictions at the micro-level, as well as the factors that produce them, in order to address the lack of local experience and stimulate a reflective discussion on the social conflict theory.

4. Methods and Research Area

4.1. Methods

To address the research question, this study adopts a qualitative approach. Qualitative research can study contemporary phenomena without being detached from real-life settings and offers detailed and nuanced descriptions of practical situations, and it is also suitable for answering questions such as 'What' or 'How' [35]. The primary focus of this study is to explore the causes and the forms of presentation of social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals, making qualitative research the most suitable approach (as shown in Figure 1). The specific research methods include (1) participative observation: we immersed ourselves in the daily lives of the research subjects, building close relationships with them through perception and interaction, to collect relevant data. (2) Unstructured interviews: we conducted interviews with different participants in the conflict to provide objective data for the theoretical analysis.

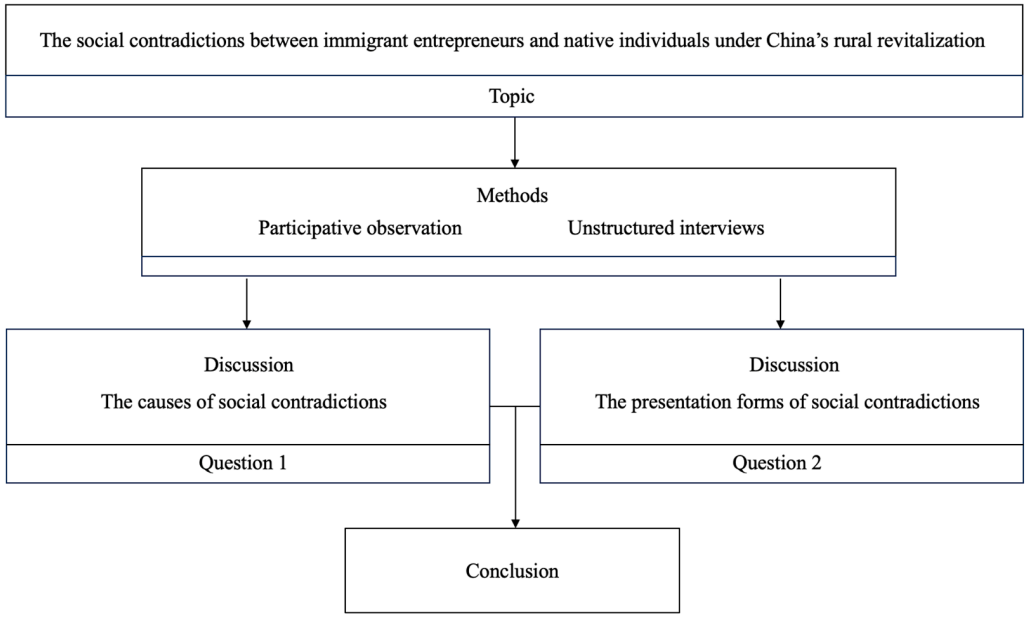


Figure 1. The research framework.

The causes of social contradictions serve as a latent symbol, rather than an overt manifestation, and cannot be fully understood through direct observation. Therefore, to identify these underlying influencing factors, the researchers used NVivo12 (Lumivero, Denver, CO, USA) to code the interview texts according to the fundamental structural rules [36]. During the open coding phase, we initially encoded the data verbatim, and then classified it based on the context, mutual evaluation, and consequences during the axial coding process. We compared the categories derived from the sample and merged similar ones.

In this study, 5 interview texts were selected as the subjects for saturation testing prior to coding [37]. During the saturation test, no new evaluation dimensions or situations emerged. In addition, there were no situations that could not be incorporated into the three value orientations, indicating that the coding results passed the saturation test. Meanwhile, the two researchers of this article independently encoded the interview texts and verified the reliability by calculating the coding consistency coefficient of the two researchers. The results indicated that 92 codes were mutually agreed upon and 6 codes were disagreed upon. The consistency was 93.88%, suggesting a relatively high level of credibility in the coding process. For the inconsistent parts, the two researchers reached a consensus after multiple rounds of discussions. Throughout the data collection process, we adhered to the principle of triangulation [38], and collected first-hand information such as observation records and the texts of interviews with immigrant entrepreneurs, native individuals, and village cadres.

4.2. Research Area

Xian Village is home to one of the largest clusters of immigrant entrepreneurs in Nanjing, and its diverse population composition and industrial structure create a favorable environment for researchers to observe a wide range of phenomena and various types of immigrant entrepreneurs [39]. The space of Xian Village can be roughly divided into the agricultural production zone, commercial zone, and the residential zone (as shown in Figure 2). The agricultural production zone includes 2600 hectares, mainly consisting of pools and tea fields. The commercial zone comprises an east–west ancient street, paved with flagstones, flanked by clubs, shops, and restaurants. The residential zone is located in the northeast and northwest of the village, where immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals live together. There are three types of houses in the residential zone: native individuals' farmhouses, homestays operated by immigrant entrepreneurs, and homestays operated by native individuals, with no clear spatial distinction between the three.



Figure 2. Map of the landscape of Xian Village.

There are a total of 650 native individuals in Xian Village. Most of them are engaged in agricultural production, while a small number of them run homestays in addition to agricultural production. Since the commercial development of Xian Village in 2016, more and more immigrant entrepreneurs have entered the village to operate tourist facilities such as homestays, restaurants, and clubs in the name of individual industrial and commercial businesses. By the end of 2023, over 60 immigrant entrepreneurs resided in Xian Village, constituting 8% of the total village population, with their numbers continuing to rise.

They generally tend to adopt a proactive and positive approach toward public affairs, actively contributing to the development of new social networks and public spaces within the community. The beautiful natural environment of Xian Village has attracted these immigrant entrepreneurs to lease and renovate vacant homes owned by locals. This not only enables them to enjoy a rural lifestyle but also allows them to generate income by attracting tourists to spend money. In fact, immigrant entrepreneurs have become deeply embedded in Xian Village. They are not only potential promoters of the modernization of Xian Village but also contribute to gradually shaping and integrating into the village community by actively participating in its public affairs.

Creswel argues that typical cases often have the potential to advance existing knowledge on both theoretical and practical levels, offering unique analytical value [40]. This paper selects Xian Village as a typical case for several reasons. First, the choice is based on the principle of research convenience. Most researchers reside and work in Nanjing, which provides them with a good understanding of local rural conditions. Second, Xian Village is one of the earliest villages in Jiangsu Province to initiate rural revitalization efforts, earning recognition as the 'Best Rural Tourism Area' in Jiangsu. Additionally, Xian Village is home to one of the largest clusters of immigrant entrepreneurs in Nanjing [39]. Its diverse population and industrial structure create a favorable environment for researchers to observe a wide range of phenomena and various types of immigrant entrepreneurs. From 2022 to 2023, members of the research team conducted extensive fieldwork within the village over a period of more than 150 days, including preliminary surveys and follow-up supplementary surveys. During the investigation process, through the introduction of the village authority, the team members established profound connections with the interviewees. Interviews are usually conducted in interviewees' households and progressively extend to encompass their social network. A total of 30 interviewees agreed to participate in the study openly (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Basic information about the interviewees.

Serial Number	ID	Place of Birth	Occupation	Classification	Interview Method
01	220508L	Nanjing	Peasant	native individual	Individual interview
02	220508W	Nanjing	Peasant	native individual	Individual interview
03	220509C	Nanjing	Peasant	native individual	Group discussion
04	220509J	Nanjing	Peasant	native individual	Group discussion
05	220510H	Nanjing	Peasant/ Homestay	native individual	Group discussion
06	220510X	Nanjing	Peasant/Homestay	native individual	Group discussion
07	220515M	Nanjing	Peasant	native individual	Group discussion
08	220515X	Nanjing	Peasant	native individual	Group discussion
09	220515Z	Nanjing	Peasant	native individual	Group discussion
10	220528L	Nanjing	Peasant	native individual	Group discussion
11	220528W	Nanjing	Peasant	native individual	Group discussion
12	220528X	Nanjing	Peasant	native individual	Group discussion

Table 1. *Cont.*

Serial Number	ID	Place of Birth	Occupation	Classification	Interview Method
13	220621X	Nanjing	Peasant/Homestay	native individual	Group discussion
14	220621D	Nanjing	Peasant/Homestay	native individual	Group discussion
15	220625D	Nanjing	Peasant/Homestay	native individual	Group discussion
16	220625M	Nanjing	Peasant/Homestay	native individual	Group discussion
17	220507H	Nantong	Homestay	immigrant entrepreneur	Individual interview
18	220603Y	Guangzhou	Age care	immigrant entrepreneur	Individual interview
19	220607S	Nanjing	Homestay	immigrant entrepreneur	Individual interview
20	220609W	Nanjing	Homestay	immigrant entrepreneur	Individual interview
21	220615K	Nanjing	Business club	immigrant entrepreneur	Group discussion
22	220615Z	Nanjing	Business club	immigrant entrepreneur	Group discussion
23	220616S	Beijing	Age care	immigrant entrepreneur	Individual interview
24	220618S	Taipei	Age care	immigrant entrepreneur	Group discussion
25	220618X	Suzhou	Age care	immigrant entrepreneur	Group discussion
26	220621P	Suqian	Coffee shop	immigrant entrepreneur	Group discussion
27	220621S	Weifang	Coffee shop	immigrant entrepreneur	Group discussion
28	220621X	Nanjing	Homestay	immigrant entrepreneur	Individual interview
29	221005T	Nanjing	Deputy Community Secretary	Authority	Group discussion
30	221005X	Nanjing	Community Secretary	Authority	Group discussion

4.3. Immigrant Entrepreneurs Settle in Xian Village

A homestay refers to small accommodation facilities that provide tourists with experience of local nature, culture, production, and lifestyle, utilizing local idle resources such as local dwellings. China's homestay industry started in 1990, with significant attention and investment from social capital beginning around 2010 [41]. The 'Annual Report on Homestay in China (2022)' predicts that the market size of China's homestay industry will exceed 30 billion after 2023, and village homestays will become an important way to promote rural revitalization [42]. According to the 'Nanjing Rural Housing Management Guidance', the government encourages rural collective economic organizations and their members to actively utilize idle land and housing to achieve the revitalization of depopulated villages. Native individuals with vacant houses typically several have options when starting a farmhouse: (1) After the approval of the administrative department of urban and rural construction, native individuals can pay a certain amount in land transfer fees to change the property of the house from residential to commercial. (2) Alternatively, they can

opt to rent out their own idle houses, leasing them to enterprises for commercial operation, and collect the corresponding rents themselves.

In 2016, in response to the rural tourism initiative of Nanjing, the government granted lenient approval to the application for the change in Xian Village. As a result, a large number of idle houses in the village were converted into commercial housing. During the initial development period, 60% of the families in the village operated homestays. Additionally, some native individuals who already lived in the city had rented their idle houses to immigrant entrepreneurs. Subsequently, over 100 urban immigrants resided in Xian Village and became the permanent residents of the village by the end of 2023, and about half of them chose to operate tourist facilities for business. The cultural tourism capital of immigrant entrepreneurs establishing homestays in Xian Village possessed its own unique characteristics. Initially, there was no large-scale transfer of collective village land. Immigrant entrepreneurs signed an agreement with some villagers to lease and renovate the commercial houses in the village as homestays. This transfer procedure merely necessitated the signing of an agreement between the leasing parties and the fairness of a third-party organization, which could take effect without involving complicated land transfer procedures. Second, there was a minimal employment relationship between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals. Homestays fall under the classification of individual industrial and commercial businesses, with relatively simple operational costs and management structures. Consequently, they do not require extensive labor absorption from native residents, unlike labor-intensive industries or wage-collecting farms. It is even less likely that a large enterprise like Dole provides exogenous support such as huge capital, advanced technology, and a strong supply chain to the village [43]. These two characteristics indicate that the capital brought by immigrant entrepreneurs who have entered Xian village is scattered and fragmented, preventing the development of a stable market ecosystem within the community.

5. The Causes of Social Contradictions Between Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Native Individuals

With the entry of immigrant entrepreneurs, social contradictions between them and native individuals began to surface. We identified three primary categories that explain the contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and natives (as shown in Table 2): lifestyle, entertainment methods, and commercial interests.

Table 2. Coding table for the causes of social contradictions.

Node Name	Identity Type	Number of Sources	Reference Points	Encoding Example
Lifestyle	Immigrant entrepreneur	12	17	1. Nightlife is a symbol of modern life. If the countryside wants to develop, it must change the traditional lifestyle. (220603Y) 2. I think that the lifestyle of native individuals is obsolete and needs a revolution in modernity. (220609W) 3. I am shocked that in the 21st century, feudal superstition still has room among the native individuals. (220615Z)
	Native individual	14	22	1. The lifestyle of these immigrant entrepreneurs bothers me. (220508W) 2. Our lifestyle, which has lasted for generations, is unlikely to be changed by the arrival of immigrant entrepreneurs. (220515Z) 3. I follow a traditional lifestyle, and I certainly don't agree with the lifestyle of immigrant entrepreneurs. (220528X)

Table 2. *Cont.*

Node Name	Identity Type	Number of Sources	Reference Points	Encoding Example
Entertainment methods	Immigrant entrepreneur	8	14	1. My friends and I engage in sharing new knowledge during our weekly reading sessions, while the native individuals' entertainment is a waste of time. (220615K) 2. I can't imagine spending the entire day playing cards and dancing with the native individuals. Such vulgar entertainment is unacceptable to me. (220618X) 3. I think I'm more comfortable with the city entertainment mode. It's much more interesting than these rural ones. (220621P)
	Native individual	10	18	1. I am frustrated that the entertainment choices of immigrant entrepreneurs seem to be a form of worshiping foreign culture. We never used to celebrate Western holidays like Christmas and Halloween. (220509J) 2. The Yangge we perform can be listed as an intangible cultural heritage. I believe the entertainment of the immigrant entrepreneurs is just a myth. (220515Z) 3. I am tired of traditional agricultural production every day. I need to relax and vent my emotions by playing poker and singing folk songs in the spare time. (220528L)
Commercial interests	Immigrant entrepreneur	5	15	1. Businesses inherently aim to maximize profits. (220507H) 2. Market competition rules benefit village development, native individuals' homestays are inferior to mine, not my problem. (220607S) 3. Free markets can bring prosperity to the village, but I want to give native individuals a taste of the competition of the free market. (220621X)
	Native individual	6	12	1. These entrepreneurs should maintain a sense of proportion and not usurp our commercial interests. (220509C) 2. Our homestays have lost a steady stream of customers because of the greed of these entrepreneurs. (220621D) 3. The entrepreneurs have violated my economic interests and I do not welcome them in the village. (220625M)

5.1. Lifestyle

Firstly, differences in lifestyle constitute part of the social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals. Lifestyle typically denotes a set of fixed and unique behaviors and habits that individuals adopt in their daily lives. It covers many aspects, such as work, rest, and leisure, reflecting people's quality of life [44]. In Xian Village, there is a significant difference in lifestyle between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals. Native individuals engaged in tea cultivation continue to start their work at sunrise and rest at sunset. They perceive the ongoing activity of restaurants into the early morning hours and the operation of bars throughout the night as significant disturbances. Conversely, immigrant entrepreneurs perceive the growth of the night economy as a way to make money. Most of the native individuals are engaged in tea planting, and all aspects of their lives center around agriculture, featuring a traditional smallholder lifestyle [45]. Nevertheless, the lifestyle of immigrant entrepreneurs is more metropolitan, even though they have entered the village. They are accustomed to a bustling and rich nightlife and attempt to replicate the urban lifestyle pattern in the village. When immigrant entrepreneurs, accustomed to modern urban life, encounter local customs,

the resulting tension between the two lifestyles creates considerable discomfort for both newcomers and native individuals.

5.2. Entertainment Methods

Secondly, the different entertainment preferences between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals also constitute social contradictions between them. Bourdieu believes that cultural consumption aligns with social position, such as the association between 'highbrow' art and elites [46]. As a part of cultural consumption, entertainment time and methods often reflect a person's social status, economic level, and cultural orientation [47]. In contrast to the decent and easy way of working of immigrant entrepreneurs, native individuals in Xian Village frequently have to work hard for a living through traditional agricultural production, leaving them with considerably less time for entertainment. The forms of entertainment are also related to the cultural orientation of the group. The forms of entertainment of the native individuals are relatively simple, and they usually gather together to play poker and chat during idle hours. During certain traditional Chinese festivals, native individuals also spontaneously organize collective entertainment activities such as singing folk songs and performing the Yangge dance. Entrepreneurs who have immigrated to Xian Village from modern cities often engage in entertainment that blends elements of both Chinese and Western cultures. They typically host grand ceremonies at home to celebrate Western festivals such as Christmas, Halloween, and Easter, often embellishing their surroundings with corresponding cultural decorations. On weekends, immigrant entrepreneurs also bond over afternoon tea, reading sessions, and coffee tastings, incorporating contemporary elements into their social gatherings. To the native individuals, these entertainment endeavors represent mysterious and foreign worship, while the immigrant entrepreneurs view the indigenous entertainment methods as simplistic and modest. The blending and interaction of diverse cultural landscapes and behaviors in the village public space create a complex, symbiotic environment with a diverse ecology and subtle interactions. This dynamic reflects the underlying tension between the two entertainment methods.

5.3. Commercial Interests

Thirdly, the conflict of commercial interests between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals is also a cause of social contradictions. In the capital market, the conflict of commercial interests emerges from opposition, discord, or competition among different entities involved in commercial activities due to disparities between their individual and common interests. In Xian Village, there is no employment relationship, but there is implicit business competition between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals. For instance, homestays run by native individuals lag behind those operated by immigrant entrepreneurs in terms of decoration, supporting facilities, and service level. Visitors to the village, particularly those from the middle class, show a preference for homestays run by immigrant entrepreneurs. Some poorly managed native individuals began to find ways to create public opinion on media platforms and within the village's public space to denigrate the immigrant entrepreneurs' industries, and even carry out personal attacks. Not to be outdone, immigrant entrepreneurs are also retaliating against native individuals through public abuse and reporting on media platforms. Native individuals believe that immigrant entrepreneurs lack consideration and assert that newcomers entering village management should maintain a sense of proportion and avoid excessive greed. Conversely, immigrant entrepreneurs openly admit that the capital inherently generates profits. They believe that competition brought by the free market and the resulting capital profits can help similar industries continue to upgrade, thereby driving economic development within the

village. Ultimately, the two sides have gradually shifted from the potential for exchanging experiences and achieving win–win cooperation to the trap of a zero-sum game.

6. The Forms of Presentation of Social Contradictions Between Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Native Individuals

According to Coser, conflict is a struggle over values, claims to rare status, rights, and resources where the opposing party seeks to undermine and harm the other [28]. It is worth noting that not all contradictions will lead to conflicts, and the development of conflicts typically entails a complex and lengthy process. In the case under discussion in Xian Village, the ongoing intensification of social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals has led to a gradual evolution across three successive stages, including the separation of production space, the emergence of interest groups, and the outbreak of intermittent conflicts.

6.1. The Segregation of Production Space

Production space denotes the area wherein the means of production and production activities converge. As a fundamental prerequisite, all human social actions inevitably unfold within a physical spatial context. As physical space becomes increasingly vital for production and is gradually commercialized by the market, it evolves to encompass multiple non-physical spatial concepts. Consequently, physical space gradually transforms into the spatial carrier of complex social relations, social cognition, and social rights [48]. The traditional Chinese village is a self-sufficient, closed society with the family as the basic production unit and the small-scale peasant economy as the dominant one. In the small-scale peasant society characterized by a small scale and high homogeneity, Chinese peasants have gradually adopted the tradition of 'good division and bad union' [49]. In the initial stages of immigrant entrepreneurs entering Xian Village to acquire industries, native individuals neither resisted nor were particularly drawn to them. Similarly, immigrant entrepreneurs establish their own restaurants, homestays, and other industries in the villages. However, their access to means of production and social networks is clearly different from that of native individuals. This separation separates immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals, preventing either side from interfering with or fully accepting the other. However, the isolation of production space can only be seen as a temporary calm. If the two fail to establish an effective communication mechanism, deeper disputes over the village's public resources will inevitably arise sooner or later.

6.2. The Emergence of Interest Groups

Community members are inevitably destined to encounter each other frequently, and true isolation in terms of space is unattainable. Over time, a dynamic of evaluation between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals emerges, leading to the formation of rumors, such as that immigrants are 'disturbing the order', 'look down on the villagers', create 'social relations chaos', and other rumors, among native individuals. According to Scott, ideologies such as nicknames and gossip were the first and least potent weapons used by native individuals, marking the beginning of a conscious struggle by villagers [50]. Influenced by peasant rationality, native individuals believe that the partners with whom they are related and geographically connected are more reliable. When their own beliefs, behaviors, and interests clash with those of immigrant entrepreneurs, they are more willing to help their relatives than to help them. To bolster their collective resistance against the perceived intrusion of immigrant entrepreneurs, native individuals spontaneously formed small groups in the villages and tried to consolidate the unity among the members by creating opposing public opinions. Simultaneously, to address the covert and often xenophobic

behaviors of native individuals, immigrant entrepreneurs have also created WeChat groups for the purpose of mutual support, consciously forming another antagonistic faction. The social relations of these immigrant entrepreneurs extend beyond the village, and their economic capital, social capital, and informal influence surpass those of native individuals. Immigrant entrepreneurs have formed initial information networks and social networks through regular collective activities, which are also highly exclusive to native individuals. In the WeChat groups created by immigrant entrepreneurs, criticism of various behaviors exhibited by native individuals is often a hot topic.

This paper employs the term 'group' rather than 'community' or 'organization' to delineate the phenomenon under discussion. Whether examining native individuals or immigrant entrepreneurs, their associations tend to be less structured, lacking established opinion leaders and normative organizational structures. Moreover, there are no shared interests between community members. This is also different from the phenomenon of enterprise bonding within the context of the capital market. The bonding between market entities is based on collusion in commercial interests, whereas the cohesion observed within native groups primarily revolves around seeking emotional comfort and adhering to implicit local norms, where the law is not to blame the public. Immigrant entrepreneurs often dissent from the rationality of local hidden norms, leading their groups to adopt a defensive stance. In addition to facilitating daily emotional exchanges, these groups also serve to harness various forms of potential energy, enabling them to take proactive measures in response to the series of deviant behaviors carried out by native individuals.

6.3. The Outbreak of Intermittent Conflicts

On one hand, negative public opinion regarding immigrant entrepreneurs continues to ferment within groups comprising native individuals. On the other hand, 'barbarism' and 'primeval' have gradually become the stereotypes of immigrant entrepreneurs in the eyes of native individuals. Consequently, the relationship is increasingly tense, often manifesting in small-scale and intermittent conflicts. We have selected the case of a village bar to illustrate the Chinese village scene, highlighting its unique characteristics within the context of a transitional society.

In 2022, immigrant entrepreneur NK planned to build a pub in the middle of the village. However, most native individuals perceived the bar as a foreign influence that could undermine the village's traditional moral values. They regarded it as an immoral establishment and were thus skeptical and opposed to its construction. They obstructed the construction of the bar through daily protests such as holding banners and staging sit-ins. Immigrant entrepreneurs deemed native individuals' actions unreasonable, asserting that the project could proceed with the necessary licenses and certificates in place. NK leveraged personal relationships to invite reporters from several renowned newspapers to come to Xian Village to interview immigrant entrepreneurs and report on the development of tourism in Xian Village. Essentially, she utilized this strategy to assert her informal authority over both the local authority and the native individuals, and this approach was positively recognized by other immigrant entrepreneurs.

> 'My bar is both legal and compliant, and the local authority should appreciate immigrant entrepreneurs. Without our personal connections, Xian Village would hardly attract media attention. I want to demonstrate the informal power of immigrant entrepreneurs through these reports and encourage the village authorities to make a prompt decision'. (interview with 220615K, 2022)

> 'NK wants to show native individuals that the countryside no longer belongs to them alone; it is time for immigrant entrepreneurs to become more active in defending our rights'. (interview with 220607S, 2022)

> 'It seems that demonstrating our informal power can effectively draw the village authority's attention to issues'. (interview with 220615Z, 2022)

Ultimately, with the mediation of local authorities, both parties reached an agreement: native individuals were prohibited from interfering with the construction of the village bar in any way, and the bar was not allowed to disturb the locals late at night or during the construction process. However, although native individuals complied with the verdict, they still exhibited psychological distress.

> 'These immigrant entrepreneurs are always aggressive in claiming village resources, there seems to be nothing we can do about it'. (Interview with 220508L, 2022)

> 'Clearly, we have become the weaker party, and the immigrant entrepreneurs will eventually own the rural space'. (Interview with 220528W, 2022)

According to the investigation, since immigrant entrepreneurs began arriving in the village one after another, dozens of small-scale and intermittent conflicts have occurred between them and native individuals. Although immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals often reach a compromise under the local authority, native individuals are always on the weak and passive side, which makes us further explore the favoritism shown by the local authorities.

6.4. Favoritism by the Local Authorities

Interestingly, in the context of various disputes arising in Xian Village, it is noteworthy that governmental intervention is rarely observed to be proactive in addressing these issues. According to Wilson, public authority is the key force in achieving social fairness and justice, and should actively perform its duties to ensure that the basic rights and freedoms of every citizen are equally protected [51]. However, in the real governance scenario, due to the influence of the political promotion tournament, local authorities in China often adopt a strategic approach to formulate specific governance plans and ultimately promote the ruling in their own favor [52]. The factors determining whether a local official wins the promotion tournament are more complex, but the Gross Domestic Product of the governing region, social popularity, and awards at various levels have consistently been recognized as important indicators by the academic community [53]. The authorities in Xian Village may lack the capacity to effectively rationalize the allocation of limited funds for village development. Entrepreneurs from the city, who possess significant economic and social capital, have played a crucial role in the village's economic and social development, as well as in increasing its popularity. As a result, they have easily gained favor with the authorities. The awards received by Xian Village since the arrival of the immigrant entrepreneurs are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. The awards received by Xian Village since the entry of immigrant entrepreneurs.

Time	Award	Issuing Authority
2022	Cultural Heritage of Geographical Names in Jiangsu	Department of Civil Affairs of Jiangsu
2020	Characteristic Pastoral Villages in Jiangsu	Department of Housing and City Construction of Jiangsu
2020	Traditional Villages in Jiangsu	Department of Housing and City Construction of Jiangsu
2019	The National Rural Tourism Model Villages	Ministry of Culture and Tourism of PRC

Table 3. *Cont.*

Time	Award	Issuing Authority
2018	Five-star Rural Tourism Area in Jiangsu	Department of Culture and Tourism of Jiangsu
2016	Rural Tourism Innovation Project in Jiangsu	Department of Culture and Tourism of Jiangsu

The interviews with village cadres further supported this argument.

'If we want to enhance the village's visibility and increase revenue, we must rely on these immigrant entrepreneurs. We are working on compromise measures to maintain the credibility of the village authority and prevent large-scale communal conflicts'. (interview with 221005T, 2022)

'We acknowledge our tendency to favor the appeals of immigrant entrepreneurs when making decisions. However, we need to create a favorable business environment that allows these immigrant entrepreneurs to adapt to the village. This adaptation is essential for the village's long-term development'. (interview with 221005X, 2022)

The local authority is more willing to support the interests of immigrant entrepreneurs in their decision-making, presenting these actions as essential for creating a favorable business environment and ensuring long-term development. However, the authority also strives to maintain a delicate balance to avoid eroding trust within the native group due to perceived injustices. At the same time, they must prevent these daily conflicts from escalating into major social risks, which could lead to severe accountability from superior authorities.

7. Discussion

According to Lewis Coser, social contradiction refers to the state of tension and conflict among diverse parties arising from an imbalance in the internal structure or distribution of interests during the operation and transformation of a social system [28]. Social contradictions often contain powerful forces that cause conflicts, and the forms and causes of these conflicts are often multifaceted and multilevel. The causes of social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals are complex. They are characterized by everyday, low-intensity, and local dynamics that are relatively common in contemporary rural China.

7.1. The Occurrence of Social Contradiction

The occurrence of social contradictions indicates that the conflicting parties harbor significant interest demands, which can manifest as concrete desires for money and material resources or as abstract social rights and human relations. Most of the existing literature discusses the influence of a single factor on the generation of social contradictions [16,17,54], but the study of Xian Village shows that disparities in lifestyle, differences in entertainment methods, and conflicting commercial interests are important factors that contribute to the social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals. It is important to note that this segmented analysis is only used for the convenience of understanding, and does not imply that these three contradictions are independent of each other. These various contradictions were intertwined within the conceptual framework of both immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals. The interactions between the two groups are influenced by the combined effects of these contradictions.

Another point worth discussing is the underlying logic of the occurrence of contradictions. This logic depends on whether the original layout of the village can be reconfigured,

whether there are conflicts of interest in the allocation of village public resources, and whether the scale of reconstruction is acceptable to the native individuals. Village space represents a social pattern that has developed over time, with familiar relationships playing a crucial role in maintaining social identity and cohesion. The rapid reconstruction of village space and redistribution of village resources will inevitably cause losses and reluctance among native individuals. As a result, the exclusion of outsider groups often becomes an instinctive response among native individuals. For immigrant entrepreneurs, the primary motive for their presence is to increase business profits. Therefore, they will inevitably prioritize actions that benefit their own interests when reconstructing village space, utilizing village public resources, integrating village functions, and refusing to do as the Romans do in the traditional sense.

7.2. The Positive Function of Conflict

Existing articles tend to discuss the destructive function of conflicts between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals in rural societies [20,21]. However, the positive functions of conflict are also worth recognizing. Tanase Takao argues that low-intensity conflict promotes community integration by preventing the accumulation of blocked hostility, as it allows for the free expression of behavior [34]. If the accumulated discontent among groups is released in a timely and organized way through conflict, it will help the group to reintegrate. In this case, the conflict can serve as a social safety salve for society [28].

The study found that aboriginal expressions of protest, such as banners and mass sittings, were described by Scott as 'everyday resistance' or 'weapons of the weak' [50]. Similarly, immigrant entrepreneurs have become acquainted with the logic of native individuals' behavior and have proactively adopted informal strategies to address indigenous protests. These strategies share a common trait: they do not require coordination or elaborate planning but instead depend on implicit understanding and informal community networks to challenge what they view as dominant groups, either directly or indirectly, in a self-interested, strategic manner. Significantly, although the social contradiction between the two groups is inevitable, the conflicts have remained within the range of low-intensity and non-political issues, reflecting a rare implicit agreement between the two sides: For native individuals, in the face of conflict, they must demonstrate resilience to enhance their negotiating power. At the same time, they should depict these disputes as ordinary and isolated incidents to prevent them from being categorized as organized violent conflicts that could threaten public safety and potentially involve state violence agencies. For immigrant entrepreneurs, they must rely on the harmonious social ecology of the village if they want to achieve more than ten years of rooted operation in the village. The continuous escalation of conflicts is detrimental to the long-term interests of immigrant entrepreneurs, as they risk being isolated by the village society.

Based on their shared interest in preserving the stability and prosperity of the village, there is a potential basis for compromise between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals. If local authorities can effectively leverage this common interest and create a political environment that promotes free speech, conflicts can be kept to a reasonable level of everyday but low intensity, which would enhance the flexibility of the village's social structure, improving the adaptability of the social system [27].

8. Conclusions

The study found that after immigrant entrepreneurs entered the village, social contradictions arose between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals, including lifestyle, entertainment methods, and commercial interests. These contradictions gradually evolved into the segregation of production spaces, the emergence of interest groups, and

the outbreak of intermittent conflicts. The local authority, amidst the pressure of political promotion tournaments, tends to show favoritism towards immigrant entrepreneurs during the interest mediation process. This preference is often exchanged for improvements in crucial indicators such as the Gross Domestic Product of the governing region, social popularity, and awards at various levels. Based on this trend, it might be inferred that native individuals in the village will be marginalized. Meanwhile, immigrant entrepreneurs, leveraging their robust economic capital and complex social relations with the upper class, gradually become the core of the village power network and continue to promote the modernization of the village (as shown in Figure 3).

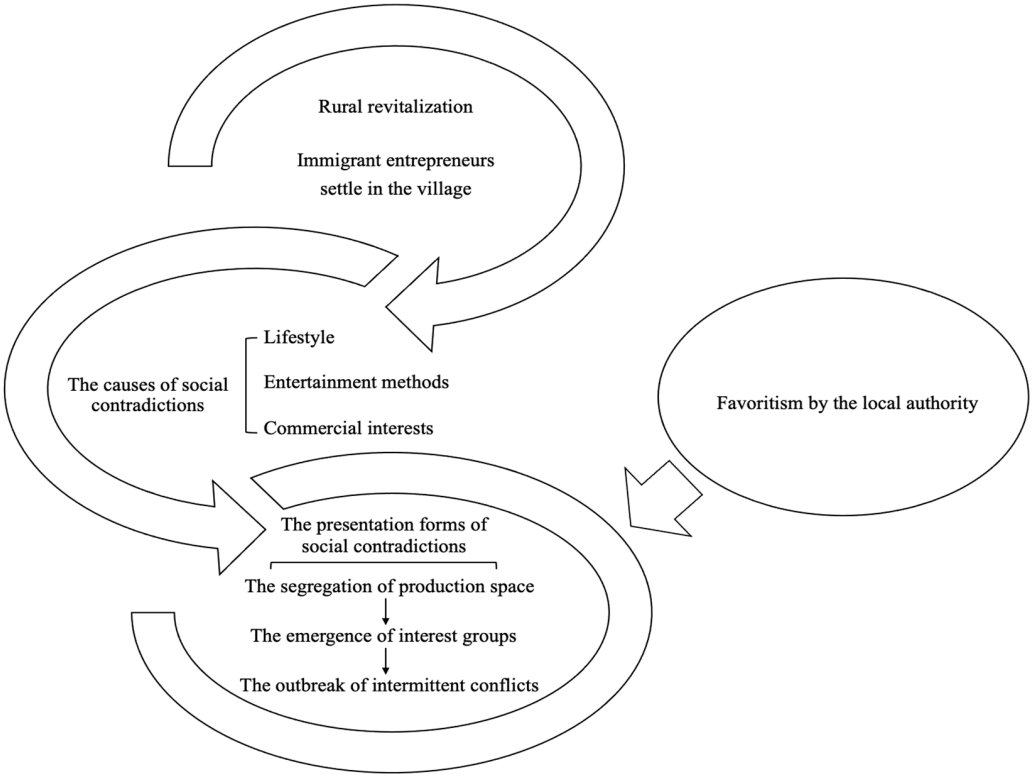


Figure 3. The social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals under China's rural revitalization.

This study makes three contributions to existing research, which basically achieves the aim of the research. Firstly, it offers a structural interpretation of the social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals at a micro level. It is concluded that the occurrence of social contradictions is the result of the double action of material factors and non-material factors, which enhances the applicability of the social conflict theory. Secondly, this study reveals that the social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals seem to be everyday and self-regulating, potentially serving as a form of social safety salve, which plays a positive role in the integration of the village society. Although conflicts occur at various stages, both groups actively contain the conflict within certain boundaries. This is due to native individuals' fear of national enforcement agencies and immigrant entrepreneurs' concern for their long-term interests, thus creating potential opportunities for compromise. Thirdly, this study challenges the prevalent belief in most studies that the local authority often mediates conflicts in favor of the weaker side. Instead, the village cadres suggest that their partiality towards immigrant entrepreneurs may be driven by the pressure of political promotion tournaments and considerations for long-term village development, signaling an intentional effort to optimize the business environment.

China's rural society is in a stage of major transformation from traditional society to modern society. This indicates that the countryside is embracing the changes brought about by modernization; however, the various conditions supporting the stable operation of modern rural society are still insufficient and the mechanism is immature [55]. Without effective mechanisms in place to reach a compromise between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals, native individuals may be excluded from the benefits of rural modernization. This exclusion contradicts the purpose of rural revitalization. For a village like Xian Village, which is currently undergoing a transitional phase, if migrant entrepreneurs overlook the existing social contradictions between themselves and native residents, and merely treat the village as a fully developed market for their business operations, they may unintentionally inflict economic or emotional harm on the local community. On the other hand, native individuals should actively acquire an understanding of market principles, cultivate a modern sense of civic responsibility, and approach the village's marketization process with an open and inclusive mindset. Furthermore, a fundamental vision of China's rural revitalization is to achieve the inclusiveness of rural communities, which also tests the governance capacity of local authorities. Simply put, in the face of complex social conflicts within rural societies, local authorities should adeptly manage inter-group tensions. Particularly on issues involving public interests, they must not show favoritism towards any party due to their own interests, as this could undermine the social credibility of local authorities [56].

Last but not least, this study provides a micro framework for explaining the social contradictions between immigrant entrepreneurs and native individuals, but there are some shortcomings in the data collection and research content, and it also provides a possibility for further research. Firstly, due to the large differences in resource endowments and policy styles of different countries, it is interesting to conduct international comparative studies based on the situation of different countries, for example, analyzing decision-making processes across different administrative levels and illustrating how the decisions affect long-term local development and how rural modernization will affect social structures. Secondly, due to the limitations of case studies, we suggest that future researchers collect and analyze more quantitative data, such as statistics on economic and social changes in the village, to build a more macro and rigorous interpretation framework. Thirdly, this study examined the causes and forms of presentation of social contradictions. Based on this, we expect more studies to explore how to solve such contradictions, including political persuasion, the formulation of reasonable market norms, equal distribution of resources, and the creation of a more inclusive community culture.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Writing—review and editing: S.W.; Preparation, Software, Validation, Writing—original draft: W.M.; Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources: H.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by The National Social Science Fund of China, NO.21&ZD174; Philosophy and Social Science Foundation of the Jiangsu Higher Education Institutions, NO.2021SJA0500.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank all the editors and reviewers for their professional work, constructive comments, and valuable suggestions on this study. Nanjing Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources provided public data for the paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

MDPI	Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute
DOAJ	Directory of open access journals
TLA	Three-letter acronym
LD	Linear dichroism

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