Rural-urban inequality and the practice of promoting sustainability in contemporary China

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Abstract

This article focuses on rural-urban inequality and its impact on the meanings and practice of sustainability in the Chinese context, based on a qualitative analysis of 30 semi-structure interviews with key practitioners. This research understands sustainability to be 'simultaneously an ideological stance, a point of convergence for political struggles, and a measure of performance for development activities' (Sneddon, 2000, p. 525). The main argument suggests that an appreciation of reducing rural-urban inequality can add new meanings to the Chinese interpretation and practice of sustainability. In the Chinese context, a sustainable future is not about maintaining the current social and environmental status for future generations, but rather, it refers to improving environmental quality and promoting social and environmental justice in the future. That is, creating a better future through transforming Chinese society from a polluted and rural-urban divided society with low-level suzhi population into a green, civilised and thriving one is the core of its sustainable development. Theoretically, this work indicates that the ways of building links between rural and urban can be multiple and dynamic. And more broadly, this research uses a Chinese case study to indicate that complex spatial relationships and interactions should be taken into consideration in sustainability studies.

Keywords

Rural-urban relationship, environmental justice, social equality, sustainability, China

Introduction

Human geographers' long-standing concern with socio-spatial structures is clearly evident in their efforts specifically to understand sustainability based on human-environment relationships (Sneddon, 2000; Taylor, 2007; Marsden, 2013). Within geographical analyses of sustainability, a considerable amount of attention has been paid to the socio-spatial construction of sustainability through rural-urban relationships. According to Akkoyunlu (2015), rural-urban linkages can play important roles in poverty reduction, livelihoods improvement and economic development via enhancing the production of public goods, achieving economies of scale in public services, developing new economic opportunities and capacity building, improving administration, and dealing with coordination failures. In his critical review, rural and urban areas are interdependent – urban manufacturers provide goods, information, knowledge and technology, while rural residents (farmers) produce food and raw materials for urban industries and become buyers of urban goods and services. Therefore, regional, national

and international policies should consider rural-urban linkages in order to trigger economic growth and solve environmental problems and thereafter sustainable development (Dunmade, 2014). Many empirical works have demonstrated that rural-urban interfaces and linkages have significant impacts on sustainable development and lifestyles, as well. These works have indicated that rural-urban interfaces have positive influences on resource use (Bain et al., 2014; Debolini et al., 2015), ecosystem construction (Larondelle & Haase, 2013; Radford & James, 2013; Chang & Sheppard, 2013), food security (Lerner & Eakin, 2011; Marsden, 2013) and improving people's income (Ward & Shackleton, 2016) in various national contexts (e.g. UK, Spain, South Africa, Morocco, and China). All of these studies have suggested that, in both the Global North and Global South, the interactions between rural and urban spaces are important in sustaining economic growth and human well-being.

However, most of these works have been done either from the perspective of economic sustainability or environmental protection, rather than focusing on the widespread three-dimensional conceptualization (environment-economy-society) of sustainable development. To address this gap, this research explores how the socio-spatial construction of rural-urban interactions enriches the meaning of sustainability and how it influences the practice of sustainability in the Chinese context. It draws on data from a wider research project named INTERSECTION, which explored the themes of intergenerational justice, consumption and sustainability in the UK, Uganda and China. The key argument of this paper is the importance of understanding the dynamic pattern of rural-urban interactions to enrich the concept and practice of sustainability, here focussing on the Chinese context.

This article is divided into six sections. Following this introduction, we provide a brief historical review of some of the key issues in rural-urban inequality in contemporary China, in order to contextualize the analysis. We next discuss the key methods and research procedures that informed this paper. Following this, the empirical analysis consists of two sections: the first section will analyse the ideological meanings of sustainability for Chinese practitioners; while the second section will analyse how these meanings are practiced in the rural-urban contexts within China. Finally, the concluding section reflects on the key theoretical and empirical contributions of this research.

Research context

Scholars have highlighted how socio-economic rural-urban inequality in contemporary China results from institutional discrimination towards rural areas through the Chinese household registration system – hukou. From the 1950s to mid-1970s, this policy restricted rural-to-urban migration (Cai, 2007) in order to ensure that there was enough agricultural labour to produce food and raw materials for industries (Solinger, 1993). This not only created an unequal division between China's rural and urban areas, but also had social consequences by establishing lower and higher classes.

From 1978 Deng Xiaoping's economic reform and opening-up policy (the Reform) introduced a market/capitalist era in China. Followig this, the rural-urban income gap was dramatically reduced in the first years due to the de-collectivization of agricultural production. However, a new rural-urban inequality was created as a consequence of the loosening of migration restrictions later. In the post-Reform era, rural to urban hukou conversion is possible but only through very limited channels including recruitment by state-owned enterprises or public services institutes, acquiring a university degree,

achieving stardom in sports or other disciplines, becoming a Communist Party (CCP) member or demobilization from military services (Liu, 2005; Wu & Treiman, 2007; Afridi et al., 2015). This situation prevents rural hukou holders accessing employment opportunities and urban benefits (such as public schooling, subsidized housing and public medical insurance) and therefore makes them social-economically worse-off than urban hukou holders in cities (Afridi et al., 2015).

Since sustainable development was inscribed in China's national strategies from 1995, China's sustainability has been frequently studied in the context of rural-urban transformation, as this transformation is increasingly considered as a way to achieve national sustainability (Yang & Liu, 2016). Recently, the urban-biased development model has been challenged for its failure to address issues such as food security, urban expansion, economic growth, social inclusion of rural residents and interregional equality in Chinese society (Wang et al., 2016). The two-caste system which prioritised the urban over the rural is transformed into a three-caste system which contains institutional discrimination towards both rural residents and rural-to-urban migrants by urban authorities.

In order to reduce the rural-urban discrepancy and thereby reduce the aforementioned problems, China's national policies and national plans have begun to shift attentions towards underdeveloped rural areas. These policies include the construction of a new socialist countryside which aims at evolving urban-rural integration through urbanising and industrialising rural areas (released in 2002) and the coordination of rural and urban development (released in 2007) (McGee, 2008). These policies have highlighted the need for rural-urban integration based on long-term and sustainable planning of land use, social welfare systems, and stronger governance in social and environmental issues, in order to avoid the problems brought about by the economic and social interactions between the rural and the urban and achieve sustainable development in both urban and rural areas (Zhang & Xu, 1999; Song et al., 2010; Long et al., 2011).

However, these efforts are still in progress, and the main focus of national strategies remains upon the urbanisation of coastal areas, in particular on the urban expansion of large mega-urban regions (Marton & McGee, 2017) and the internal and global-local market for land (Rimmer, 2002). The key aim of the call for rural-urban integration is to relieve the environmental and population pressure in urban areas (Li & Liu, 2013), rather than altering the urban-centred development model. There are persistent socio-environmental problems arising from this such as the increasing income gap between rural and urban areas (Sicular et al., 2007), the abandonment of farmland, the decline of environmental quality in rural and peri-urban areas (McGee, 2008) and the uneven allocation of social benefits between the urban and the rural (Fu & Ren, 2010). In this article, we see this current rural-urban inequality and the political aim of rural-urban transformation as key contexts for understanding the meaning and practice of sustainability in China.

Interviewing Chinese stakeholders

This article draws on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted in Mandarin Chinese by the first author with key stakeholders working in community centres and street committees (these are the basic Chinese CCP organisations authorised by the local council; N=6), governmental research departments (N=2) and NGOs (N=22) working on either environmental or social sustainability with people from various generations.

Although these organisations have different interests and goals, they are well-placed to offer a perspective on the top-down discourse of sustainability and justice in China. NGOs in China are not directly funded by the Government, but they are embedded within formal state structures. Most of the researched NGOs, wherever they are based, are registered at provincial or local Civil Affairs Bureaus and receive funds from governments at multiple levels.

In this research, the non-governmental actors and officials were recruited through different paths: for the non-governmental actors, the first author contacted them via the contact details provided on their websites or through a snowball approach; but for the officials, she relied on her personal guanxi – a system of strongly affective social networks among individuals and between an individual and organisations (Keith et al., 2014), which is useful in recruiting CCP officials in China (Zhang & McGhee, 2014) – with scholars in Nanjing University. The first author contacted the CCP representatives through scholars working at Nanjing University who have personal or working guanxi with the officials.

The following empirical sections are structured on the basis of a qualitative analysis assisted by Nvivo. For protecting the personal information of the respondents, all of the names and organisations mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

Sustainability as a transition to a better future in China

Sneddon (2000) suggests that geographers should explore the following questions regarding 'sustainability': what is to be sustained, at what scale, by and for whom, and using what institutional mechanism? In order to answer these questions and provide an overview of discourses of 'sustainability' as understood by Chinese practitioners, this section interprets how the notion of 'sustainability' is described and defined by our interviewees.

Although different organisations tend to interpret the connotations of sustainability from diverse positions, one component of sustainability – improving or maintaining people's well-being in the future – is common among the interviewees. Indeed, critical studies of intergenerational justice suggest that achieving a just distribution between generations is a vital premise and principle for sustainability both in theory and practice (e.g., Daly, 1990; Barry, 1997; Page, 2007a; 2007b; Manderscheid, 2012). For the interviewees, the key goal of sustainability is caring for future generations. Cultivating a sustainable lifestyle at the individual level is represented to be a significant way to care for the future:

> People of this generation are living on loans from future generations, and we have to pay back the loans, rather than just leave them to be paid back by the future generations, or the lenders. In this sense, there are two things that we can do for our next generations. First of all……*we should act now to restrict our consumption and stop overconsumption……* Secondly, we hope that environmental education will be promoted among younger generations. [interviewee from Shanghai Recycling Centre]

> Our objective of ecological education is to cultivate future citizens with a sense of *sustainable development ...... People start to look back towards the morality and see that it* can solve a lot of social problems that money cannot solve. With such an emerging (trend), there will be a new morality within society and the next generation will further enhance its development [interviewee from Green Forever]

These interviewees suggest that it is the current generations' responsibility to protect the environment, conserve resources and cultivate sustainable moralities for the sake of the future generations' well-being and a better China in the future.

Furthermore, the promotion of individual suzhi (people's personal abilities and cultivation) is important to establish a sustainable future (Liu et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2013). Although all of the stakeholders have emphasised the leading role of the Government in handling environmental problems and underpinning sustainable development, citizens' responsibility to care for the future through moral activities towards the environment and other people are also highlighted. For example, an environmental-friendly lifestyle which is

> based on moderate and healthy consumption rather than the overconsumption we now see growing in China [quoted from the interview with an interviewee from a regional planning institute].

and civilised behaviour (such as avoid littering and spitting on the floor) in the public should be fostered, in order to maintain both environmental and social sustainability.

However, many interviewees noted that the huge disparity between urban and rural development – from both economic and social perspective – makes Chinese society unsustainable and inharmonious (Li & Liu, 2013; Ma, 2010; Marton & McGee, 2017). The interview data demonstrates that, the uneven development between the urban and the rural in contemporary China hampers people's equal access to economic, environmental and social resources. For example, these two interviewees reflect on the harms to the well being of both present and future generations:

> We can obviously see that some backward industrial sectors are moving from more developed areas, or the eastern coastal areas, to the less developed western China. A similar case is found in Jiangsu as well, our investigation shows a trend of moving the polluting industries from more developed southern urban areas to less developed areas in the province, like northern villages. But the relocation does not solve the real problem. Rather than a well-planned industrial *transformation towards a better development, it's more like simply* transferring the pollution from this location to that. [interviewee from Green City]

> Because of the urban-rural gap, their parents migrate to seek better jobs in a city, leaving their children behind, and because of the urban-rural gap, children in rural areas and in cities do not enjoy equal access to the quality of living or educational resources. [interviewee from Free Food]

It is obvious in these two quotes that the prioritization of the urban over the rural has brought about environmental problems and social fragmentation in rural areas. In addition, for these interviewees, the interdependent social and environmental problems have led to the current unsustainability of Chinese society. Firstly, environmental problems in rural areas are perceived as interconnected with rural poverty. Because of the prevalence of poverty in rural China, eradicating poverty, rather than protecting the living environment, is considered to be the primary goal for rural residents. Therefore, in most rural areas, people tend to seek to make more money, in order to improve their own living standards and work towards a similar lifestyle as their urban counterparts. This concentration on the increase of personal incomes in rural areas is to some extent harmful to environmental sustainability, as a staff member from Green Bell (an environmental NGO) relates,

> I will talk more about rural areas, and from what I see in the rural areas where we work, I would say poverty is still a big iss*ue, and people don't care much about how to use natural resources properly……The local people used to care only about how to raise more cattle* for a better financial income so that they could live a better life, at least get a step closer to city life. With the population growth, there are not enough pastures now for them to raise more cattle, for which they have to rent pastures elsewhere. They are actually under great pressure now.

This quotation describes an unsustainable path of development in rural China caused by poverty, which focuses (sometimes unsuccessfully) on meeting the needs of the present while compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Secondly, Chinese stakeholders who were interviewed considered both rural residents and rural-to-urban migrants to be socially excluded and vulnerable. For example, according to the co-founder of Tonxin Social Development Centre (a NGO aiming to enhance the social inclusion of children), the children of rural-to-urban migrants, whether they are left in the rural areas or brought into urban areas by their parents, experience discrimination by the current hukou and education system. They do not enjoy equal education opportunities with urban children (the next section will provide more details of this education inequality) and therefore struggle to fulfil parental aspirations of upwards social mobility, which places a significant strain on family relationships. Our interviewee indicated that,

> *It's common that many parents from rural areas have no idea of the emotional support* within family and they beat their children, violently sometimes, and stubbornly hope their children could be admitted by a university simply because a college graduate could find a better job and make more money to support them. If they find their children unlikely to become college students, they would push them hard to find a job and start making money to support them. This surely will result in a terrible relationship between parents and their children [quoted from the interview].

These quoteations provide an example of the perceived vulnerabilities and lack of opportunities for rural residents to achieve a better living condition in urban areas because of the institutional discrimination against rural people and poverty in rural areas. Such social problems in practice hamper the well-being of these migrant students and thereby obstruct the achievement of social justice, an important pillar of Chinese sustainability (Guo et al., 2013).

In summary, according to Chinese practitioners, the ideological notion of 'sustainability' in the Chinese context is sustaining environmental quality, accessible social resources and stable incomes for both current and future generations through actions by the Government, government-sanctioned NGOs and individuals at urban, regional and national scales. In this sense, sustainability should be understood to be a transition from the current unequal relationship between the rural and the urban into an equal one, based on an effort on increasing social, economic and environmental resources in rural areas. This ideal which concerns 'transition' denies the conventional understanding of sustainability as a concept about maintenance, sustenance, continuity of a certain resource and relationship (Voinov, 2008). Taking these concerns of rural-urban inequality in both environmental and socio-economic spheres into consideration, the next section moves from a focus on the general understanding of sustainability to the practices of this concept in the broader context of rural-urban inequality of China.

Approaching sustainability and building rural-urban links in China

This section analyses how these researched organisations work to sustain both rural and urban areas, drawing on two interdependent pillars of sustainability – environmental justice and social equality – which frequently arose as key issues in the interviews.

Environmental justice

Environmental justice concerns the equality of assessing environmental goods (Balme, 2014) and the capabilities of 'people being able to live lives that they consider worthwhile (Sen & Nussbaun, 1993)' (Edwards et al., 2015, p. 755), which is one of the key indicators of sustainability. Numerous studies have indicated that the dramatic development of China's economy in the past several decades has caused huge environmental problems which are harmful to Chinese people's well-being, especially the poor people in rural areas (Ma, 2007; Ma, 2010; Holdaway, 2010; Balme, 2014). In contemporary China, both

the establishment of environmental law that encompasses principles of environmental impact assessment, information disclosure, polluter-pays, and ecological compensation and public participation in environmental movements and policymaking in formal and informal ways are key ways to maintain and promote environmental justice (Balme, 2014). Interviewees working withing the basic CCP organisations told us that local councils intend to pay environmental NGOs for their campaigns for promoting both rural and urban residents' environmental awareness.

However, environmental governance in China has struggled with the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens to the populace. According to Eaton and Kostka (2014), although environmental laws are enforceable nationwide, the local councils at provincial and municipal levels take the major responsibility for environmental management. This autocratic but decentralised form of environmental governance attributes the responsibility of distributing environmental resources equally to the local government through a top-down approach. A staff member of Green City argued that although it is possible to involve ordinary people in local environmental management because of this decentralised environmental governance, it is difficult to build equal communications among representatives from industries, local residents and officials from the local government. On the one hand the industries and governments do not want to disclose all of their environmental-related information to the public, and on the other hand the local residents do not believe that the officials and representatives from industries can respond to their appeals, as they perceive that local governments are working for the authorities rather than the people and that industries only care about their financial interests. In these cases, environmental NGOs have played vital roles to bridge negotiations between these actors and have urged the industries and government to open their environmental reports to the public.

According to the interviewees, rural residents are victims of the unjust distribution of environmental problems because of the lack of environmental education in rural areas. It is a common belief that public education can raise people's environmental awareness, especially younger generations' awareness of environmental protection. Once the population gains environmental awareness they can contribute to constructing a better future. Environmental education resources are provided only for urban residents, because the organisations which can provide regular environmental education are primarily based in urban areas which are working with urban communities and schools, because their funds are mainly provided by city councils and public schools. The government-authorised environmental NGOs employ alternative approaches in working with rural residents, such as improving the rural residents' living conditions through imparting new agricultural skills, teaching environmental knowledge through formal courses or participatory activities and installing environmental-friendly energy systems (e.g. biogas tanks) in villages, rather than a systematic environmental education. As these organisations are funded by city councils and regional governments, their key goals are still maintaining sustainability in urban areas or at widely regional scales through rural development, rather than sustaining the rural lifestyles. As a member of staff from Ecological Watch states,

> We received funds from Honghe prefecture [in Yunnan province], Kunming [the capital city of Yunnan province] and Southeast Asian funds for reducing pollution in the Mekong River area……*We provide technology support for rural household*s.

We teach them how to use new energy, such as bio gas and solar energy, in daily life, in order to protect the regional environment.

Furthermore, although the process of making environmental decisions has become more democratic in recent years, communications among industries, ordinary people and the government are still insufficient in China. Only a handful environmental organisations are involved in direct action against polluting enterprises of negligent governments or helping citizens to take environmental action (Rooij, 2010). Among those NGOs who agreed to be interviewed for this project, only one of them – Green City – is active in organising bottom-up campaigns or actions to bring ordinary people's petitions to the authorities. This Nanjing-based environmental organisation works on projects to reduce industrial pollution and its impacts on rural residents' health problems. The key aim of this organisation is trying to force the local government and industries to disclose their pollution-related data to all residents in rural and urban areas. According to its staff, although it is possible to involve ordinary people in local environmental management, it is challenging because of the difficulties described above around disclosure of information, the relative power of different stakeholders and the extent to which ordinary citizens trust such processes. Additionally, rural residents do not protest against the polluting factories relocated from urban areas because they do not think they are eligible to be paid environmental compensation fairly,

> They started to do something, reporting, protesting and petitioning. But none of these really worked…… some of the residents living nearby the chemical industry *parks didn't want to move. In fact, it's not that they didn't want to move, but they* were in a dilemma, like having two voices fighting in their heads. Having lived there for so many years and suffered so much, they would at least want better *compensation than what they're supposed to get, which is really a small amount, to* support their living after being relocated. These residents are all farmers who have no other skills to make a living after leaving their land. And the compensation is far from enough for them to buy an apartment in a new place. [quoted from the interview]

Thus, environmental resources are not equally distributed between rural and urban areas – rural people are more vulnerable to pollution because of their poverty, lack of knowledge and information, lower-level awareness of environmental issues and the urban-biased environmental policies. Although a number of NGOs are working to change this situation in the context of rural-urban transformation and the Government's increasing focus on the rural areas, the rural-urban injustice of environmental policy is still difficult to tackle for the following reasons: 1) the paucity of environmental organisations which are based in rural areas; 2) that poor and powerless rural people find it impossible to make a living through the compensation paid by corporations or the local council after their environmental litigations; and 3) perhaps most importantly, urban-biased environmental policies and goals have created an institutional bias against rural areas.

Social equality

Scholars (e.g., Liu, 2005; Qian & Smyth, 2008; Fu & Ren, 2010; Hannum et al., 2010) believe that the rural-urban disparity and hukou system have significant implications for social equality and social mobility. According to the interview data, the inequality of education attainment among the three groups – urban residents, rural-to-urban migrants and rural residents – is one of the key rural-urban inequalities in the social

sphere. As children and young people are conventionally understood to be the future of the Chinese nation in Chinese official discourse (see, for example, Liu et al., forthcoming), both governmental and non-governmental organisations have focused on how to provide children and young people sufficient educational resources. For them, education is an important way to enhance people's levels of suzhi. However, the inequality of education attainment is the key socially unsustainable issue caused by the rural-urban divide.

Due to the institutional priority given to urban areas, the allocation of educational resources, such as public schooling and social funds for formal education, is now urban-biased in China. Although the Compulsory Education Law designates nine years of compulsory education in both urban and rural areas, local level governments are responsible for raising most of the money to pay for it (Fu & Ren, 2010; Hannum et al., 2010). This decentralisation or localisation of education policy has created a barrier to accessing educational resources for poor students in rural areas, as resources are concentrated in cities. Because of the shortage of financial funds for rural education, teachers' salaries in rural schools are much lower than those working in urban schools (Qian & Smyth, 2008). Thus, teachers, especially those who have higher education qualifications, tend to seek better-paid job opportunities in cities. Moreover, since most of the post-compulsory schools are located in urban areas, rural students have to leave their families if they want to access these educational resources (Fu & Ren, 2010). For higher education, the long-standing university exam system, together with skyrocketing tuition fees, is a major barrier to rural student access, compared to their urban counterparts (Hannum et al., 2010).

In order to address the issue of educational inequality between urban and rural areas, some government-authorised NGOs are striving to transfer high-quality urban education resources and qualified teachers to the rural areas. In this way, rural children are given opportunities to share the same education resources as their urban counterparts do. Thereafter, future generations can enjoy more equal education in both rural and urban areas, in order to sustain an equal national strategy of social resource distribution in the future.

Rural-to-urban migrants are also disadvantaged under the current education system. Chinese citizens can access free or subsidised public education (the 9-year compulsory education) only in the area of their registered residence. In most cities, non-local hukou holders cannot be enrolled in local schools unless the schools have quotas for 'guest' students (Afridi et al., 2015). These 'guest' students usually have to pay substantially higher fees than local hukou holders (Liu, 2005). Rural-to-urban migrant workers constitute the major part of the urban poverty population. These fees are unaffordable for the relatively poor rural-to-urban migrants. Therefore, these migrant workers' children have to go to schools with lower fees, cheaper schools providing lower-quality education. According to two NGOs working with rural-to-urban pupils, the hukou system creates a major barrier for these migrant students to gain equal educational opportunities in line with their urban counterparts:

> Due to the limitations exerted by the household system, children from other places are unable to enjoy the 9-year compulsory education in Panyu District; therefore, they have to abide by the so-called points system for school entrance, which is, in our points of view, a system of a competition of family background. It means that the length of time of residence, occupation, and proof of property ownership and the

educational background of the parents would all be considered if a child wants to enter into a s*chool. We think that all of these are irrelevant to kids' education.* [interviewee from Xiao Jinyan]

[Rural-to-urban] migrant children usually go to the schools that provide less quality education, or you can call them lower-level schools in the public education *system. These children are faced with the issue of education justice here, ...* because they do not enjoy the equal access to quality education as urban children do. [interviewee from Le Zhong]

In order to equalise the education among rural, rural-to-urban and urban students, these organisations take actions to send teaching resources (urban graduates) to teach in rural schools (Teach China), offer tutoring sessions after school (Le Zhong) and set up communications between ordinary rural-urban migrants (parents) and the local council (Xiao Jinyan) in urban areas under local and provincial governments' guides.

In addition to educational inequality, interviewees highlighted the vulnerable living conditions of rural residents. According to a member of staff at Free Food, because of the increasing rural-urban gap in China, her organisation has extended its remit from providing poor rural students who are not able to afford for lunch on campus free food and kitchen appliances, to protecting rural schoolgirls from sexual assault, buying clothes for poor rural families and advocating for fair access to public insurance for serious illness.

Regarding the redistribution of other socio-economic resources between the rural and the urban, some organisations are considering the relocation of social services from urban to rural areas. When talking about the organisation's future plans, a member of staff from Xiecai elderly care centre indicated that his organisation is going to build its new nursing houses in remote rural areas with better environmental quality. He suggested this would have the dual benefit of providing a better service for urban older people, and addressing unemployment problems in rural areas,

Our organisation will establish a college soon, which will provide professional training for our employees. Therefore, we can even help the government in a way to ease the employment pressure by, for example, training rural unemployed workers and hiring them as our employees.

It is obvious in the above example that the plan of building rural nursing homes is not merely to provide better services to the urban older generation, but also to increase the employment rate in rural areas and thus bring urban working opportunities to rural areas.

However, like the environmental organisations we interviewed, these social organisations are all urban-based and supported by local and regional governments. Thus, their key aims are not only providing equal social services and opportunities for both rural and urban residents, but also sustaining urban well-being and stability. As the staff member from Free Food relates,

If we just leave so many rural [people]… *in a state of having no or little access to* social services, they may develop a kind of resentment against the whole society or against urban people, and in the absence of personal safety, do you think our urban residents will be safe with those [rural] kids around? These issues are all interrelated, right?

Therefore, even though the Chinese authorities and government-authorised NGOs are working to address the socio-economic gap between rural hukou holders and urban ones, social resources are still allocated to these two types of Chinese citizens unequally. Such inequality can be regarded as an obstacle to achieving social sustainability in China, as it brings about potential threats to a stable urban society in the future. This is generally considered to be a problem for the Government to solve, as the most powerful agent in China.

Conclusion

This article has explored how official practices of sustainability are shaped by rural-urban inequality in the Chinese context. Instead of viewing sustainability or sustainable development as a static ideal or norm, this research understands sustainability to be 'simultaneously an ideological stance, a point of convergence for political struggles, and a measure of performance for development activities' (Sneddon, 2000, p. 525). For practitioners of sustainability in China, establishing a sustainable future – which is characterised as a society with stable and sustainable economic development, better environmental quality, just distribution of social resources and a civilised society of people with high-level suzhi and harmonious interpersonal relationships – means challenging and changing current patterns of rural-urban development. That is, despite that the literal meaning of 'sustainability' as designated as 'maintenance, sustenance, condition, relationship in all cases there is the goal of keeping something at a certain level', in practice, achieving sustainability appeals for social change and renewal (Voinov, 2008, p. 489). Thus a sustainable future is not about maintaining the current social and environmental status for future, but rather, it refers to improving environmental quality and promoting social and environmental justice in the future. In summary, creating a better future through transforming the Chinese society from a polluted and rural-urban divided society with low-level suzhi into a green, civilised and overall developing one is the core of its environment-economy-society sustainable development.

However, the current social injustice consequences of the rural-urban divide in China have compounded the vulnerability of rural people and rural-to-urban migrants. Altering this situation will require reducing the economic, social and institutional differences between the rural and the urban through shifting policy-makers' focus towards rural development and the challenges faced by rural-to-urban migrants. Thus, from the perspective of many respondents, the Government should take primary responsibility to work with civil society organisations to reduce the social, economic and environmental disparity between the rural and the urban, and to end all forms of institutional discrimination against rural areas.

This research has emphased multiple and dynamic linkages and interactions between rural and urban areas. In addition to rural-urban integration through urban expansion and creating peri-urban and rural-urban fringe zones discussed elsewhere (Zhang & Xu, 1999; McGee, 2008; Li & Liu, 2013; Marton & McGee, 2017), this research highlights three key interactions or links between rural and urban areas. One is sustaining urban social justice through providing equal social opportunities for both rural and urban hukou holders in urban areas. The second one is balancing rural and urban sustainability through transferring environmental knowleges, skills, materials and social resources from urban to rural areas. And the third one is maintaining environmental and social rights in rural areas through professional aid from the urban. Although these three types of rural-urban

interactions are designed and carried out with an urban-centred focus, they are seeking to make social and environmental changes towards rural sustainability. That is, the previous urban-centred development model which focuses on supporting urban economic growth through rural agricultural production is now transforming towards a rural-urban integrated pattern that improves environmental and socioeconomic conditions in rural areas through urban support. Such practices of the interviewed stakeholders in this study have demonstrated a starting point for Chinese social change in relation to rural-urban equality.

However, as this article is based on the narratives from CCP representatives and government-authorised NGOs, it only can present the official practices to approaching sustainability through making rural-urban links. The actual impact of these official discourses and practices on people's well-being in rural areas should be further analysed.

More broadly, this Chinese case study on sustainability indicates that considering the relationship between rural and urban areas is important to explain the spatial dimension of sustainability. The emerging body of works on sustainability through a spatial scope has pointed out that sustainability is a dynamic process, rather than a stable issue limited in one place/scale (Kythreotis & Jonas, 2012). The analysis of sustainability in the context of Chinese rural-urban inequality in this research develops this spatial argument through adding a relational aspect to it: the meanings and practices of sustainability do not merely gain different connotations through the trans-boundary/trans-scale processes, but are also formed through the dynamic and multiple relationship between spaces. As we have focused on all three dimensions of sustainability in this research, we also want to suggest that, scholars should pay more attention to social and environmental perspectives on sustainable development in their works on rural-urban relationships.

Acknowledgement

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