



From a virtuous cycle of rural-urban education to urban-oriented rural basic education in China: An explanation of the failure of China's Rural School Mapping Adjustment policy



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historical transformation of the rural education system and the mapping of rural schools in ancient, modern and contemporary China to explain the problems of the Rural School Mapping Adjustment (RSMA) policy. The value and purpose of the rural basic education system and school mapping adjustment are “urban priority and urban oriented”, which is the fundamental reason for the failure of the RSMA. A diachronic study of the history of China's urban-rural relationship indicates that the relationship of traditional China's urban-rural education was a virtuous cycle in which the city and the countryside were completely equal and reinforced each other. The promotion of modern education in the late Qing Dynasty severely undermined that virtuous cycle, leading to an urban-oriented rural education and the destruction of traditional values and a loss of the traditional ways of teaching. Although China has attempted to reduce the disparity between cities and the countryside by increasing the public financial investment in rural basic education after achieving a universal basic education, our case study in a village in North China demonstrates that the urban-oriented school mapping adjustment takes a toll on the rural area and exacerbates the problem of educational inequality, which actually increases the gap between urban and rural areas and between the rich and the poor. The conclusion is reached that the Chinese government should strive to develop a rural-oriented and rights-based rural basic education system and school mapping adjustment.

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1. Introduction

In 2001, the State Council of China issued *The Decision on the Reform and Development of Compulsory Education*, explicitly requiring that the educational quality of rural schools should be improved by restructuring school mapping and integrating resources. To implement this policy, local governments started the Rural School Mapping Adjustment (RSMA) by withdrawing and merging most village-level schools that were considered to be inefficient and costly, promoting boarding schools for rural basic education, shifting primary schools from the village to the township and shifting secondary schools from the township to the county. According to *The Assessment Report of the Rural Education*

Adjustment in the Past 10 Years released on November 17, 2012, from 2000 to 2010, the number of rural primary schools decreased by 229,400, with a 52.1% decline. Teaching centres and rural secondary schools were reduced by 111,000 and 10,600, respectively, a decrease of 60% and more than 25%, respectively. In an average day, China's rural areas witness the disappearance of 63 primary schools, 30 teaching schools and 3 junior high schools; 4 rural schools become non-existent almost every one hour. During the 10 years, the number of Chinese students attending primary schools and junior high schools in rural areas fell by 31.5349 million and 16.44 million, respectively. Most of these students enrolled in schools in towns and counties (Zhang, 2012).

The RSMA policy has been accompanied by many problems, including frequently occurring accidents involving rural school buses, leading to great dissatisfaction in rural society and critiques and reflections in the academic circle. The RSMA imposes additional financial, caregiving and mental burdens on rural families, given that, after the adjustment of the school distribution, schools in cities are relatively far from home in villages and townships (Ye

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and Meng, 2010). The boarding schools in rural areas separate students from their parents and the local community, exacerbating the problems in rural areas and education in those areas (Wang and Pan, 2012). Other problems caused by the policy include mis-allocated resources, poor quality of life, rising costs of living, issues concerning student safety, high dropout rates, and a loss of rural culture heritage (Mei et al., 2015).

Concerning the reason for the above-mentioned phenomena, scholars have approached this topic from different perspectives. Some articles analyse the impact of school accessibility on children's educational outcomes in rural China (Brown and Park, 2002; Liu et al., 2010; Li and Liu, 2014). Retention rates at the village-level school have consistent effects on enrolment and graduation (Connelly and Zheng, 2003). The principle of educational equity should be given more attention, given that evidence suggests that some children lose the opportunity to learn at a local village and rural families have different preferences regarding merged and unmerged schools (Zhao and Parolin, 2014).

Small rural schools have a significant role to play in delivering education services in rural China and should therefore be retained, supported and equipped with the appropriate levels of facilities and quality services for them to fulfil their role (Zhao and Parolin, 2011). Some scholars have attempted to analyse these problems from a politics perspective. Wang (2005) views the inability of farmers as a disadvantaged group to exert a powerful impact on the government's policy as the fundamental reason of a poverty-stricken rural education. Rao and Meng (2012) argue that, although the central government has increased its input in education through transfer payments and projects, the county-level government went awry in pooling elementary education funds to adjust the layout of rural primary and secondary schools, subjecting rural society to an accelerated recession.

However, why were these so-called efficiency-priority strategies of adjustment, which did not accord with the principle of educational equity, adopted and implemented by the county-level education management committee? The view that the county government is an actor with the motivation to chase its own self-interest under the theory of the public choice cannot explain why the value and ideas of the public rural basic education system and school mapping restructuring were urban-oriented. On the other hand, the analytical perspective that holds that the rural basic school adjustment is a scientific plan according to the amount of students and the distance that the students must cover to go to school ignores the fact that the RSMA was not only an issue of planning but also an issue of which type of value should be considered more to guide the planning.

There has been a controversy in the academic circle on the issue of "off rural areas" or "for rural areas" as the value and ideas of rural education. Scholars who insisted "off rural areas" hold that cultivating talents for urbanization and industrialization should be the aim of rural education development. In their opinion, "off rural areas" are an inevitable tendency of the rural area and rural education in developing country. In general, it has been the truth that the recipients of rural education deviate from rural communities, as they aim to leave behind the countryside and agriculture to become part of the non-agricultural population (Weng, 2009). The other is "for rural areas". These scholars argue that rural culture was once a spiritual sanctuary for us and that, more importantly, rural education shoulders a great responsibility in cultivating talents for the development of rural areas and the revitalization of rural culture.

There is a wide agreement that rural basic education has been advanced under the direction of "urban priority" and that a huge gap and disparity between the rural and urban educational system have existed for a long period of time (Qian and Smyth, 2008; Rong and Shi, 2001; Postiglione, 2006; Hannum, 1999; Kanbur and

Zhang, 2005). What is the relationship between the failures of the RSMA initiated in 2001 and this "off rural areas" value of the rural education system? Why does rural education embark on the road of "urban priority and urban oriented" that is completely inconsistent with rural practice? It is necessary to explore the history of China's rural education, tracing back to the time before China was affected by globalization and modernization.

This article aims to uncover the fundamental reason for the failure of the policies and practices of the RSMA over the past 15 years by viewing the restructuring of China's rural education from a historical perspective. We analyse the rural basic education system and school mapping restructuring from two perspectives: one is the historical perspective. It explores the historical transformation of rural education restructuring from ancient China to modern and contemporary China to understand why and when rural education embarked on an urban-oriented route that is completely inconsistent with rural practice as well as when and how China's rural education failed to incorporate rural areas. The other perspective is the discussion of the disparities between the rural and urban basic education system. The development of the rural basic education system and school mapping restructuring are highly related to the relationship between rural areas and urban areas. In ancient China, rural and urban areas were an undifferentiated unity, and the two reinforced each other, which also occurred in education in urban and rural areas. Since the late Qing Dynasty, the relationship between rural and urban education has changed dramatically as a response to the huge change in the urban-rural relationship. Additionally, the background of the RSMA, initiated in 2001, is that, starting in 2000, the Chinese central government had begun important adjustments to the unequal relationship between urban and rural areas. Thus, to explain the RSMA, we must consider the development of the rural and urban relationship. After these reviews, a case in Hebei Province is analysed to show how rural areas and actors respond to the RSMA, how the RSMA, initiated in 2001, withered rural society. In the conclusion and discussion, we argue that the "urban priority and urban-oriented" RSMA, initiated in 2001, which was also expected to tackle the challenges of the disparity between the urban and rural education systems, increased the gap between cities and the countryside, trapped rural education, and undermined rural society. To rebuild a "rural-oriented" education system and school mapping, rural and traditional cultural values and the rural community's rights of participation must be fully respected and recognized during the course of Chinese social development.

2. The rural basic school restructurings and education systems from ancient China to contemporary China

2.1. An undifferentiated unity of the urban and rural education systems and school mapping in ancient China

A review of the ancient Chinese education system (see Fig. 1) shows that the ancient Chinese education system consisted of two systems: one system was the official school system and the other was the private school system. According to the location of the schools, the official school system in general can be divided into central official schools and local official schools, with the former including Imperial College and a variety of specialized and vocational schools. Based on the administrative levels, the latter was classified into prefecture, county and township schools. The teachers at official schools were also national government officials. The official schools were established for the state's selection of talents through the imperial examinations. With respect to the official schools, the private schools flourished more because they were widely distributed in urban and rural areas, taking a variety of

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