

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Cultural Production of “Bad” Rural Schools in China

Yuan Teng¹  and Jiaxin Chen² 

¹Faculty of Education, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China, and ²Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR

Corresponding author: Jiaxin Chen; Email: jiaxin-ruby.chen@polyu.edu.hk

Abstract

Rural schools in China have long been in a state of underdevelopment. Studies have mainly addressed this issue from the perspective of rural–urban structural inequality, while neglecting the cultural processes that lead to inequality reproduction. Through the lens of cultural production, this study analyses qualitative data gathered in Gongshui county in central China, revealing how rural teachers and parents construct a negative perception of rural schools, evoked by devalued meanings associated with schools’ physical appearance, teaching staff characteristics and academic performance. Influenced by the discourse on rural inferiority, teachers and parents have cultivated a collective identity of becoming “less” rural and adopt strategies to disassociate themselves from rural education and community. Their cultural production of “bad” rural schools perpetuates and reinforces the underdevelopment of rural schools. This study draws attention to the cultural misconceptions surrounding rurality and the cultural processes by which educational inequalities are produced and reproduced in rural areas, both in China and globally.

摘要

中国农村学校长期处于欠发展状态。已有研究主要从城乡结构性不平等的视角来探讨这一问题，而忽视了导致不平等再生产的文化过程。基于文化生产的视角，本研究通过分析在中国中部贡水县收集的定性数据，揭示了农村教师和家长将农村学校的外观、师资特征和学业成绩与负面意义相联结，从而建构其对农村学校负面认知的文化过程。受“农村落后”论调的影响，这些教师和家长形成了一种“去农化”的集体认同，并采取逃离策略与农村教育和社区进行脱钩。他们对“差的”农村学校的文化生产延续并强化了农村学校的发展不足。本研究旨在呼吁关注当下对农村性的文化误认，并关注中国乃至全球背景下产生和再生产农村地区教育不平等状况的文化过程。

Keywords: China; cultural production; rural inferiority; rural–urban gap; school underdevelopment

关键词: 文化生产; 农村落后; 学校发展不足; 城乡差距; 中国

“I prefer to work in urban schools. In comparison, our school is relatively *cha* 差 (bad, lacking).” (T-Zhang)

“There is a school in our village. But it is too *cha*.” (S-Bo’s mother)

Rural teachers and parents commonly use the term *cha* 差, meaning “bad” or “lacking,” to describe rural schools in China. Their negative comments reflect the rural–urban gap in Chinese education.¹ Existing literature has primarily focused on this issue within the context of the long-standing structural inequalities in educational resources.² Scholars have attributed the underdevelopment of schools in rural China to the country’s historically decentralized education financing system and

1 Kong, Hannum and Postiglione 2021.

2 Cuervo 2016.

urban-biased allocation of physical resources.³ Analyses in developing countries such as Peru⁴ and Pakistan have uncovered similar situations.⁵ Additionally, international evidence has shown that schools in impoverished communities struggle to attract and retain high-quality teachers, negatively affecting educational quality.⁶ In China, rural teachers tend to be less experienced, receive less training and have lower educational attainment compared to their urban counterparts, and rural schools find it difficult to recruit principals with good leadership skills.⁷

The underdevelopment of schools in rural areas has attracted the attention of China's policy-makers. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the government has implemented various policy interventions to increase resource allocation to rural schools. For example, the rural–urban financial and physical resource gaps have narrowed since the national introduction of the county-based (*yixian weizhu* 以县为主) educational investment system in 2001 and the “New policy ensuring funds for rural compulsory education” in 2006.⁸ The urban–rural ratio of per-student public expenditure for primary schools decreased from 1.28:1 in 2005 (1,544 and 1,205 yuan, respectively)⁹ to 1.06:1 in 2017 (10,362 and 9,769 yuan). Additionally, the construction of rural schools in China has improved, with around 88 per cent equipped with playgrounds, standardized school buildings and subject-specific teaching equipment by 2017.¹⁰ Both the ratio of per-student public expenditure and the construction rate of rural schools in 2020 were similar to those in 2017.¹¹ The nationwide implementation of initiatives such as the “Policy of free normal education for pre-service teachers” (since 2007) (*Gongfei shifansheng* 公费师范生), the “National teacher training project” (since 2010) (*Guopei jihua* 国培计划) and the “Rural–urban teacher rotation policy” (since 2014) (*Chengxiang jiaoshi jiaoliu lungang* 城乡教师交流轮岗) has also brought more highly educated teachers to rural schools. By 2017, 43 per cent of rural primary school teachers held a bachelor's degree or higher, which is more than 14 times the figure for 2005.¹²

Alongside the improvements in resource allocation for rural education, the overall educational attainment of rural students has improved. Data from the 2010 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) indicate a notable increase in the length of schooling for the rural population, from 3.7 years for the 1940–1944 cohort to 9.3 years for the 1985–1989 cohort.¹³ In 2015, 77 per cent of rural students in the 15–17 age group were admitted to high school, which is a significant increase from just 43 per cent in 2005.¹⁴ The pass rate of rural middle school students in one county of Gansu province rose from 25 per cent in 2013 to 33 per cent in 2018.¹⁵ This evidence indicates the significant impact of policy interventions in educational resource allocation on improving rural students' academic outcomes.

However, the rural–urban gap in students' academic outcomes persists. The length of schooling for the urban cohorts of 1940–1944 and 1985–1989 (7.3 years and 13.4 years, respectively) was nearly double and 1.44 times that of their rural counterparts.¹⁶ Furthermore, in 2015, the high school enrolment rate for rural students remained 20 per cent lower than that of their urban peers (97 per cent).¹⁷

3 Zhang 2019.

4 Castro and Rolleston 2018.

5 Tayyaba 2012.

6 Marshall 2009; Munje 2019.

7 Cui, Xia and Wang 2022; Hallinger and Liu 2016; Kong, Hannum and Postiglione 2021.

8 Zhang 2019.

9 Ministry of Education 2006.

10 Ministry of Education 2018a.

11 Ministry of Education 2021.

12 Ministry of Education 2018b; 2006.

13 Golley and Kong 2018.

14 Wang, Lei, et al. 2018.

15 An 2021.

16 Golley and Kong 2018.

17 Wang, Lei, et al. 2018.

More importantly, despite all the above-mentioned improvements, rural people's negative perceptions of rural schools in China have persisted. For instance, an ethnographic study conducted in Gansu province between 2003 and 2005 illustrated that the majority of rural parents perceived rural schools as considerably inferior to urban schools.¹⁸ Additionally, a 2015 survey found that more than half of the 780 rural parent respondents from Jiangsu province reported an average or below-average level of satisfaction with rural compulsory education.¹⁹ Another survey, conducted in 2018 across 18 provinces, discovered that around 81 per cent of young rural teachers expressed a strong desire to transfer out of rural schools, suggesting that they were dissatisfied with their current working conditions.²⁰

A review of the existing literature suggests that focusing exclusively on the rural–urban gap in educational resources is insufficient for comprehensively understanding the complexities of the current situation in rural education and addressing the underdevelopment of rural schools. Some have further contended that the mainstream explanations, which emphasize economic injustice and distributive approaches, downplay the importance of cultural justice in the development of rural education.²¹ Thus, in addition to existing structural explanations, this study adopts a cultural perspective to examine rural teachers' and parents' perceptions of rural schools. It investigates how these perceptions are constructed and shaped through cultural processes and, in turn, how they influence people's identity and actions, which may hinder rural education development. This exploration aims to provide new insights into the cultural processes that give rise to and perpetuate educational inequalities in rural areas, both in China and globally.

Reviewing the Cultural Process of Inequality Reproduction

Relevant sociological literature reveals three key groups of social factors that produce and reproduce societal inequality: material resources (economic-related capital), non-material resources (cultural and social capital) and location-based effects (neighbourhood- and community-related factors).²² Michèle Lamont and colleagues highlight that, in addition, “what is typically missing from the picture is an understanding of how inter-subjectively shared meaning structures (e.g. scripts, narratives, repertoires, and symbolic boundaries) come to enable and constrain behaviours” and reproduce the existing inequalities.²³

This cultural process of inequality reproduction involves two areas of examination. First, it explores how individuals in disadvantaged situations interact with existing social systems to actively construct the meaning of their social lives when examining the reproduction process of inequality.²⁴ Paul Willis's study in the 1970s demonstrated that British working-class “lads” consciously produced a counter-school culture and constructed a masculine image of working-class jobs to challenge the mainstream ideology of educational meritocracy; however, this eventually contributed to their social reproduction.²⁵ In a 2000 study, Lamont finds that individuals from different social classes develop different conceptions of worth, which further generate and reproduce symbolic boundaries between the upper-middle and working classes.²⁶ Beth Hatt observes that marginalized youth construct a “street smart” identity to distinguish themselves from the dominant “book smart”

18 Kong 2016.

19 Qi 2015.

20 Zhu and Liu 2019.

21 Cuervo 2016; Roberts and Green 2013.

22 Bourdieu 1984; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Lamont, Beljean and Clair 2014.

23 Lamont, Beljean and Clair 2014, 580.

24 Giroux 1981; Holland et al. 1998; Willis 1977.

25 Willis 1977.

26 Lamont 2000.

promoted at school; nevertheless, their cultural practices may entrench the conditions for their social segregation.²⁷

Second, studies from the cultural process perspective also critique the lack of awareness among social actors regarding existing cultural inequalities in society and examine the effects of this unawareness on societal outcomes. For instance, Django Paris argues that a deficit perspective has long been adopted to analyse and address inequalities in teaching and learning practices in US society. However, while acknowledging cultural differences, this perspective primarily adopts the prevailing norms of the dominant white middle class as criteria for evaluation, which results in the devaluation of the cultures present in the homes and communities of poor and minority students.²⁸ Consequently, the funds of knowledge possessed by socially disadvantaged groups and the changes in their cultural practices are overlooked, thereby perpetuating their inequalities. Furthermore, recent discussions pinpoint the oversight of cultural misrecognition of rurality in rural education studies. Some scholars argue that, in addition to resource-distribution disadvantages in rural areas, the concept of rurality in modern societies is often constructed according to metro-centric values and is ideologically loaded with negative evaluations.²⁹ However, such negation of rurality has seldom been problematized. For instance, since the early 2000s, curricula and textbooks used in schools have been based on knowledge derived from metropolitan areas, while most rural knowledge and culture are excluded from core subjects and assessments.³⁰ Recent findings indicate that the design of the “National teacher training project” in China is primarily based on an urban-oriented ideology that marginalizes rural knowledge.³¹ This approach may undermine the effectiveness of the training project for the professional development of rural teachers. Thus, scholars suggest that both distributive and cultural recognition approaches are necessary to promote social justice in rural education.

Nevertheless, most research on the development of rural schools in China has somewhat neglected these cultural processes, which are critical for both understanding the causes of inequality and framing solutions. More importantly, there are growing concerns about teachers’ and parents’ active agency in fuelling the underdevelopment of rural schools. For example, despite receiving higher salaries than their urban counterparts (4,511 and 3,462 yuan per month on average nationwide, respectively),³² over 80 per cent of young rural teachers (35 years or younger) from 18 provinces in China prefer to work in urban schools due to more attractive public services and lifestyle choices available in cities.³³ They are also less inclined to engage in professional learning activities (for example, peer observations for 1–2 lessons per semester compared with 12–15 for urban teachers).³⁴ Both of these factors perpetuate the rural–urban teaching capacity gap.

As a form of human capital, parents also play a key role in facilitating their children’s academic achievement and cooperating with teachers to improve school performance. Nevertheless, in China and elsewhere, although parents from disadvantaged social positions may have high educational expectations, they are often perceived by teachers and even themselves as incompetent and less capable than urban (or middle-class) parents in fulfilling this human capital role.³⁵ Consequently, such parents may then disengage from their children’s schooling or withdraw from family–school cooperative activities, both of which are important for student development and school improvement.

27 Hatt 2007.

28 Paris 2012.

29 Corbett 2007; Yi 2011.

30 Li 2020; Roberts and Green 2013.

31 Guo and Zhao 2023.

32 China Rural Educational Development Research Institute 2019.

33 Zhu and Liu 2019.

34 Wang, Dan, et al. 2017.

35 Lareau 2003; Murphy 2022.

Although the significant role played by teachers and parents in rural education has been established, little research has focused on how their perceptions of rural schools are shaped through daily interactions with the education system and how these perceptions guide their behaviour regarding rural education and rural communities. Furthermore, these perceptions and actions may not solely stem from unequal resource distribution; they may also arise from the cultural production of devaluing meanings associated with rurality, a factor which has been largely neglected in current scholarship.

In this study, we adopt the cultural process perspective and borrow the explanatory tools proposed by Dorothy Holland and colleagues (i.e. artefacts, discourses and identity) for analysis.³⁶ As discussed by Holland and colleagues, individuals make sense of their surrounding worlds via certain artefacts, thereby establishing their collective identities in relation to their surroundings. This process of meaning-making, otherwise termed the “cultural production process,” can be understood through three key components – artefacts, discourses and identity. Artefacts can be tangible or intangible human-made items, the meanings of which construct people’s perceptions of their social surroundings. Discourses provide the underlying rationale for why people interpret these artefacts in a taken-for-granted manner. These artefacts, therefore, function as symbolic mediators, and their assigned meanings reflect the power relations within the social space. By sharing similar experiences in this cultural process, individuals form a collective identity that reflects their self-positioning in society and guides their subsequent actions.

This study explores the cultural process through which rural teachers and parents actively construct their perceptions of rural schools and identify their relationship with rural school development. Furthermore, we examine whether and how cultural inequalities in rurality are recognized and interpreted by teachers and parents in this process. Three research questions are posed in reference to the aforementioned three components of the cultural production process. First, how do rural teachers and parents perceive rural schools, and through which artefacts? Second, what dominant discourses underpin their perceptions? Third, how might these culturally produced perceptions affect their identity and actions regarding rural education and rural space?

Methods

This study forms part of a wider project, conducted in Gongshui county 贡水县, Hubei province, in 2018, which explores the reasons for and outcomes of rural parental school choices in China. Gongshui, a mountainous area where the main industry is agriculture, has 75 per cent of its population as rural residents.³⁷ The case of Gongshui is well-suited to addressing the research questions for two reasons. First, as in other rural areas, the aforementioned national policy interventions aimed at improving rural education have been implemented in Gongshui and were essentially completed by 2017. Consequently, Gongshui passed the “National assessment for balanced development of compulsory education” (*yiwu jiaoyu junheng fazhan pinggu* 义务教育均衡发展评估) in 2017,³⁸ with over 86 per cent of its rural schools meeting national standards for playgrounds and functional classroom construction prior to our investigation.³⁹ However, interviews with school principals indicated that there has been almost no new investment in Gongshui’s rural schools since 2017. A follow-up visit by the first author to the research site in 2023 further confirmed this.

Second, Gongshui was selected for its representation of a prevailing school-choice trend in rural China,⁴⁰ where large numbers of rural families send their children to urban schools within their

³⁶ Holland et al. 1998.

³⁷ Prefecture-level City Statistic Bureau 2019.

³⁸ Prefecture-level City Educational Bureau 2018.

³⁹ Hubei Educational Bureau 2018.

⁴⁰ Kong 2016.

Table 1. Interviewees

No. of Participants			
Rural parents	Parents/grandparents who chose an urban school	Father	4
		Mother	40
		Grandparent	39
		Total	83
	Parents/grandparents who chose a rural school	Father	7
		Mother	15
		Grandparent	23
		Total	45
Total		128	
Teachers/principals	Rural schools	39	
	Urban schools	49	
Total		88	

county, eschewing the initially assigned village schools.⁴¹ Since 2014, the household registration (*hukou* 户口) system has been reformed to promote urbanization in medium-sized and small cities.⁴² With the relaxation of the *hukou* system, small cities have welcomed rural residents, opening their public facilities regardless of *hukou* status, thus enabling rural families in Gongshui to choose urban schools within the county even if they have no urban *hukou*.⁴³ Some rural families even buy or rent apartments nearby and designate adult family members to chaperone their children while they study (*peidu* 陪读).

In Gongshui, we investigated six rural primary schools (five full-grade schools and one teaching point, or *jiaoxuedian* 教学点, with two grades) located in six villages under the jurisdiction of three towns, and six urban primary schools from the townships and county capital to sample rural parents and teachers. Teachers from rural and urban schools were recruited voluntarily for comparison and triangulation, ensuring diversity in terms of gender, age, educational level, teaching subject and position. With the help of teachers and using snowball sampling, we then invited rural parents in the county who had opted for different school choices for their children. The parent sample also varied in gender, age, occupation and educational level.

Semi-structured interviews were the main method of data collection, supplemented by school observations and archival data. Parents and teachers were invited to share their observations and perceptions of rural schools. We asked open-ended questions such as: “What are your thoughts on rural schools/teachers/students?” “Why do you hold such perceptions?” and “What is your educational (or career) choice?” In total, 128 rural parents (45 from rural and 83 from urban schools) and 88 teachers/principals (39 from rural and 49 from urban schools) participated in individual interviews (see Table 1).⁴⁴ Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

The data analysis started with an open-coding process using Nvivo software. We employed descriptive coding for observational notes and in vivo coding to capture teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of rural schools.⁴⁵ Codes arising from research questions and the theoretical perspective

41 Prefecture-level City’s Evening News 2014.

42 State Council 2014.

43 Teng and Wang 2025.

44 All interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

45 Saldaña 2016.

of cultural processes were further contrasted with the terms used by teachers and parents. We used Holland and colleagues' explanatory tools of artefacts, discourses and identity to identify and generate themes.⁴⁶ This approach revealed the coding themes as artefacts in rural schools that teachers and parents commonly interpreted negatively, the discourse of rural inferiority that underpinned their perception of "bad rural schools," a collective identity of "becoming less rural" and their resultant departure strategies. We further examine whether teachers and parents recognized this discourse of rural inferiority, and if so, how they interpreted it and why.

"Bad" Rural Schools as Construed by Teachers and Parents

Three artefacts evoking negative perceptions of rural schools: actual disparity or symbolic bias?

Holland and colleagues contend that people's perceptions of their surroundings are "evoked, collectively developed, individually learned" via certain artefacts, which makes these artefacts socially and culturally powerful.⁴⁷ This study found that teachers and parents often ascribed negative meanings to three artefacts they observed in rural schools, which contributed to their perception of these schools as "*cha*." These artefacts were the school's physical appearance, the teaching staff's characteristics and students' academic scores.

For instance, 23 of the 39 rural teachers made negative comments about their school's facilities, saying:

We don't have a laboratory. We don't have enough space for work ... we only have one office room for 13 teachers. (T-Liu)

The teaching facilities in our school are not as good as in the urban schools. So how can we perform as well as [urban schools] do? (T-Wang)

Second, most of the teachers (27 of 39) and parents (88 of 128) shared concerns about the quality of the teaching staff. Teachers at School Ban considered their school to be lacking because it had "more elderly and low-quality teachers" than the township school (T-Chen). Similarly, S-Na's mother commented, "School Ban is relatively bad. The key problem is its poor-quality teachers," while S-Ao's mother and S-Dawei's grandfather echoed this sentiment, stating that School Ban's teachers were "not responsible" and worked "perfunctorily."

The third important aspect teachers and parents used to describe rural schools was students' poor academic performance, often evaluated through exam scores:

[A] school with a bad academic performance is also considered bad. Ours is one such school. (T-Lu)

School Luo used to be good and was one of the top schools in our town. But it has become worse and worse in recent years. I heard that its test scores often rank last in our town. (S-Yong's grandfather)

Although rural teachers and parents varied in gender, age and educational level, most interpreted these three artefacts negatively – rural schools had fewer advanced facilities, poor-quality teachers and low academic scores – thus concluding that all six investigated rural schools were not good. This finding was not unexpected. School observations and archival data also revealed unsatisfactory performances in teaching quality and academic outcomes in some rural schools, particularly when compared with their urban counterparts. Four of the investigated rural schools had lower teacher–class ratios than urban schools, and almost all of the investigated rural schools had a higher percentage of teachers aged 50 or above (over 33 per cent compared to 13.5 per cent) (Table 2).

⁴⁶ Holland et al. 1998.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 61.

Furthermore, the rural and urban schools in Gongshui county differed in final examination scores by 8 to 15 points.

However, further analysis reveals another story: the negative connotations associated with these artefacts could represent symbolic bias to some extent, as two other issues should be considered. First, the extent to which the rural–urban differences in school conditions contribute to lower-quality student development remains uncertain. School characteristics, such as good facilities, sufficient numbers of teachers and teachers with appropriate qualifications, evidently do not by themselves guarantee improvements in academic performance.⁴⁸

Second, even if the resource gap affects quality, the figures in Table 2 demonstrate that the six investigated rural schools did not always perform badly. For instance, their physical infrastructure had largely been improved. Schools Ban, Jie and Shan had playgrounds with rubber mulch, and all the schools except Shan had independent functional classrooms equipped for music, experiments and studying. All six schools had a good teacher–student ratio, and three of them boasted a higher-than-average percentage of teachers under 40 for Gongshui county.

Despite these positive aspects, the teachers and parents we interviewed still perceived the six rural schools to be “bad.” For example, seven rural teachers, including T-Yan, T-Tang and T-Huang, who had worked in their current schools for over 20 years and had witnessed significant improvements in educational funding and physical resources, still considered their schools to be lacking and inferior to urban ones. Although rural parents living near these rural schools could also observe the substantial improvements in the schools’ physical appearance and the increased number of younger teachers, they steadfastly believed that “urban schools are better than rural schools in all aspects” (for example, S-Wei’s and S-Rong’s mothers) and that “urban teachers teach better” (S-Fang’s mother).

As suggested by Stephen Ball’s study, this entrenched negative perception of rural schools among teachers and parents is likely shaped by both historically developed and immediately constructed discourses of quality.⁴⁹ These discourses prompt social actors to interpret and assign meanings to the artefacts they use to make sense of their social surroundings and shape their identities in relation to those perceived environments. In the following section, we explore the discourse that leads rural teachers and parents to associate negative meanings with their observations of artefacts in rural schools, regardless of their actual conditions, and to label these rural schools as “bad.”

Discourse of rural inferiority

Further analysis of rural teachers’ and parents’ interpretations of the negative meanings attributed to observed artefacts in rural schools reveals a discourse of rural inferiority, which underpins their perception of rural schools as “bad.” First, they tend to regard the urban context as a benchmark for evaluating the rural situation, which results in a negative portrayal of rural education and life due to the significant divergence from urban standards. As the interview data demonstrated, rural teachers and parents naturally compared urban and rural schools:

The facilities in urban schools are much better than ours. They have a whiteboard for teaching. We don’t. We use the blackboard. Although we have *banbantong* 班班通 (a multimedia teaching device), some are broken, and some are not updated ... how can we compete with urban schools? (T-Qin)

The taken-for-granted rural–urban comparison indicates that rural teachers and parents have constructed their conception of “good” in reference to urban standards, thereby developing negative views of the “rural.”

48 Greenwald, Hedges and Laine 1996; Hiebert and Morris 2012.

49 Ball 1997.

Table 2. Teacher Quantity and Structure in Rural Schools in the 2017–2018 Academic Year

	Rural Schools in Villages						Urban Schools(mean)	County Average
	<i>Luo</i>	<i>Ban</i>	<i>Tan</i>	<i>Jie</i>	<i>Ping</i>	<i>Shan</i>		
No. of students	272	148	99	71	65	12	1,669	890
No. of teachers	15	18	11	5	8	2	73	41
Class size (mean)	45	25	17	14	9	4	60	54
Teacher–student ratio	1:18.1	1:8.2	1:9	1:14.2	1:8.1	1:6	1:23	1:22
Teacher–class ratio	2.5:1	3:1	1.8:1	1:1	1.1:1	0.7:1	2.6:1	2.5:1
Teacher structure								
Over 50 years old	20.0%	33.3%	36.4%	40.0%	62.5%	0.0%	13.5%	15.9%
Under 40 years old	53.3%	22.2%	45.5%	20.0%	25.0%	50.0%	43.2%	42.3%
Senior level	13.3%	22.2%	9.1%	20.0%	62.5%	0.0%	22.6%	20.5%
Bachelor’s degree or above	33.3%	22.2%	18.2%	20.0%	25.0%	0.0%	31.3%	27.6%

Furthermore, regardless of the actual circumstances, rural education – along with its teachers and students – was often described in negative terms, while their urban counterparts were consistently viewed in a positive light. For instance: “Education in the city is different. It is far ahead of education in *xiangxia* 乡下 (the countryside) ... [Interviewer: Why?] ... Schools in urban cities must be better than those in *xiangxia*” (S-Jun’s mother).

Rural parents described rural teachers as “old” (S-Siyang’s mother), “irresponsible” (S-Wenjie’s grandmother) and “speaking [with] accented Mandarin” (S-Han’s mother). They regarded rural children as having rural ways of thinking (S-Hui’s mother), being *laoshi* 老实 (guileless) (S-Ru’s mother) and “dirty” (S-Qian’s grandmother). In contrast, they referred to urban teachers as “young ... [speaking] more standard Mandarin” (S-Han’s mother) and being “more responsible and [having] better teaching methods and teaching ideas” (S-Jie’s mother). Furthermore, urban students were seen as “having better personal hygiene” (S-Qian’s grandmother), “having broad horizons” (S-Hui’s and S-Xuan’s mothers) and “dressing decently” (S-Qiang’s mother).

This generally accepted negation of rurality extends beyond education, as urban life and locations were often depicted as advanced, whereas rural life and places were portrayed as backwards. Around two-thirds of rural teachers thought that urban life was more modern than rural life, and more than two-thirds of rural parents considered urban areas to be more advanced than rural areas. For instance, T-Lin noted, “Working in the countryside must narrow our horizons. It limits our development. After all, the conditions and environment in the city are different ... Individual *suzhi* 素质 (quality) is also different. Urban residents, students and colleagues all have higher *suzhi*.” The evidence suggests that any observations of rural–urban differences are used as proof that rural schools are “bad,” as these rural teachers and parents overlook the actual conditions or potential positive aspects of rurality and instead internalize a cultural hierarchy that positions urbanity as superior and rurality as inferior.

More importantly, such a discourse of rural inferiority could be further reinforced by the belief among rural teachers and parents that test scores are the most important criterion for evaluating a school. Of the 39 rural teachers we interviewed in this study, 33 considered ensuring high test scores for their students to be their primary responsibility, as exam scores are a significant criterion in the annual performance appraisals of both teachers and schools. According to one interviewee: “The test score is the most important [criterion] for schools. [The government] only looks at the result of your academic performance and never cares about the process” (T-Wang). Similarly, rural parents perceived test scores to be the “most important” determinant in their children achieving a university diploma, securing a promising job and building a better life:

Dushu 读书 (education) is the only way to escape the fate of farmers. I hope [my daughter] can study hard and perform well on the test. Then, she can be admitted to a good middle school and a good university. Only this way can she find a good job and live an easier life. (S-Jingxi’s mother)

This narrow focus on exam scores when evaluating the schools prevented the rural teachers and parents from recognizing any positivity in rurality. For instance, S-Tao’s grandfather criticized teacher T-Liu’s teaching competency because S-Tao, a student in T-Liu’s class, scored only around 60 out of 100 in Chinese. However, T-Liu was regarded as a responsible and caring teacher by his colleagues, because he “cares about students even after class and teaches students important life principles” (T-Yang). Similarly, although S-Zihao diligently helped to harvest loquats at home, his teacher did not appreciate his farming skills and described him as a bad student because of his poor academic scores: “This boy [S-Zihao] performs too poorly. He [could] only score 10 points in the exam. I guess there is something wrong with his IQ. How will he make a living in the future?” (T-Wan).

These teachers and parents lack awareness of and fail to critique the discourse of rural inferiority that underpins their negative perceptions. S-Tao's grandfather and S-Zihao's teacher were unconcerned about whether rural students' low scores stemmed from their difficulties in mastering urban-oriented knowledge. Neither of them questioned the lack of recognition for knowledge acquired from rural life within the school evaluation system. Instead, exam scores took precedence for both teachers and parents. Consequently, the existing disparity in scores between rural and urban schools served to justify their perceptions of "bad" rural schools, further reinforcing the underlying discourse of rural inferiority.

Thus, while rural–urban structural disparities do exist, the negative perceptions of rural schools held by both teachers and parents are also underpinned by their internalization of rural inferiority and the lack of any critique of the prevailing urban-biased ideology in China's education system, which significantly contributes to the gap. By overlooking the potential of rural communities as valuable resources, the discourse of rural inferiority serves to create and perpetuate these negative perceptions of rural schools.

The Collective Identity of Becoming Less Rural: Departure as a Solution

As noted above, rural teachers and parents collectively create a subtractive image of rural schools in their interactions with the education system. This further leads to the emergence of ideas about self-positioning, during which individuals "tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are."⁵⁰ Consequently, the teachers and parents in our study positioned themselves as "becoming less rural," distancing both their children and themselves from rural education and rural communities via different strategies: the teachers aimed to obtain urban residences and job transfers, while the parents opted to abandon rural schools.

Teachers' pursuit of urban life and their social detachment from rural communities

Perceiving rural schools as "bad" and the rural as "backwards," most rural teachers, especially those in their early and mid-career, sought an urban life that included an urban job, an urban lifestyle and an urban education for their children. In pursuit of this goal, they actively distanced themselves from local rural communities.

Among the 39 teacher interviewees, all those under 35 (12) and six in their 40s expected to eventually work in the county seat/township schools; ten teachers under 35 were already preparing to teach in urban schools at the time of the interview. Interviewees pointed to three main reasons. First, echoing previous studies, the teachers in our study expressed dissatisfaction with the working conditions in rural schools. They cited issues such as the inadequate planning for improving teaching (T-Zhao) and the overly heavy workload (T-Pang), factors which drove them to seek better teaching positions in urban areas.⁵¹ Second, in addition to their preference for an urban teaching position, rural teachers, especially young teachers, also desired an urban lifestyle, which they associated with greater convenience, better public services and a wider range of entertainment options. One teacher, T-Xiong, explained: "Teaching in rural schools is inconvenient. The school is far from the township and county seats, making shopping inconvenient. Additionally, the village lacks entertainment options and has nowhere to watch movies."

Third, as parents themselves, almost all the married rural teachers – similar to the interviewed rural parents – wanted their children to attend urban schools. Concern for their children's education substantially influenced their desire to work in urban schools. As one teacher explained: "I am pregnant now and am going to have a child soon. It will be more convenient for my child to attend

⁵⁰ Holland et al. 1998, 3.

⁵¹ Zhu and Liu 2019.

school if I can teach in the county seat ... Learning in the county seat will provide my child with broader horizons ... [which will be] better for his/her all-around development" (T-Hua). As a result, none of the children or grandchildren of rural teachers in our study attended rural schools, except for T-Liu's granddaughter, who stayed for convenience.

Rural teachers' urban preference has contributed to an exodus of high-quality educators. Within our study site, three teachers under 35 left their rural school for urban positions in either the county seat (T-Zhang) or townships (T-Qian and T-Zhao) during the 2018–19 academic year. According to colleagues, these three teachers were excellent teachers and key members of the school's teaching development, and their departure hindered the progression of their schools: "Teacher Qin was our school's director of the academic affairs office, head teacher and English teacher. Since she left, we only have one young teacher now, and almost no one can organize teaching and research activities" (P-Yao).

Alongside their intention to physically leave rural schools, we found that rural teachers were socially detached from rural communities. Even before they had secured an urban job, two-thirds of the interviewed rural teachers had already eschewed the countryside to reside in more "urban" locations, commuting between rural schools and their county-seat or township homes on a weekly or daily basis. These commuter teachers had little contact with local villagers and communities, reporting that they "don't have communication with villagers" (T-Hu). Moreover, the few locally residing rural teachers (8 out of 39) were no more engaged with their local community than their commuting peers:

On Fridays, [commuting] teachers hope to finish school earlier to return to the county seat, [while] those living in our village want to go home early to help with farming. (S-Dawei's grandfather)

Two teachers are village committee members. But they do not attend committee meetings ... [and] show no concern for our community. (S-Gang's mother)

As a result, almost all the parent interviewees reported barely knowing the teachers at the local rural school.

As Dan Wang suggests, when faced with poor educational conditions, rural teachers are reluctant to invest any effort in teaching and instead withdraw into their private affairs.⁵² Our findings further demonstrate that these teachers intentionally seek an identity characterized by greater urbanity and less rurality, both for their children and themselves. This "less rural" identity not only leads to their eventual withdrawal from rural teaching but also makes it harder for any remaining teachers to fully commit to the future development of the rural schools where they currently work. Consequently, with their dominant focus on the pursuit of an urban life, any attention they devote to improving their teaching is geared towards obtaining an earlier job transfer rather than fostering long-term development in their rural schools.

Parents' abandonment of rural schools

Owing to rural parents' shared perceptions that rural schools are "bad" and their desire to obtain a "higher-quality" education for their children, 46 per cent of students in the catchment areas of the six investigated rural schools were lost to county-seat or township schools in the 2017–18 academic year; only 27 per cent of school-aged children were enrolled in the rural schools in their catchment area (see Table 3). As one parent who had chosen an urban school explained: "[S-Zerui] did not do his homework at the village school, and the teacher was not bothered about this ... Then, we transferred him to the urban school. The education [there] is much better. Now, he always gets around 90 points" (S-Zerui's mother).

⁵² Wang, Dan 2013.

Table 3. Distribution of School-aged Children in Catchment Areas of Rural Schools

School	School-aged Children in Local Area N	Enrolled Students (%)	Lost Students ^a (%)	Among Lost Students:-		
				Studying in county seats/townships	To cities where migrant-worker parent lives	Other ^b
Luo	513	53.0%	47.0%	14.9%	26.3%	5.8%
Ban	595	24.9%	75.1%	56.1%	16.3%	2.7%
Tan	635	15.6%	84.4%	51.1%	25.7%	7.6%
Jie	240	29.6%	70.4%	45.8%	18.0%	6.6%
Ping	431	15.1%	84.9%	62.5%	17.1%	5.3%
Shan	47	25.5%	74.5%	59.6%	13.0%	1.9%
Total	2,461	27.1%	72.9%	46.4%	21.1%	5.4%

Notes: ^aThe proportion of lost students among all school-aged children in local areas; ^bChildren enrolled at another village school or without specific school information.

Moreover, many of the parents we interviewed had left rural areas, opting to rent or buy apartments near urban schools and abandon village life – a trend that is known as *peidu* in China:

We are *peidu* here [the county seat] because [S-Hang's] parents want to send him to the county-seat school. The quality of our own [rural] school is not good. (S-Hang's grandfather)

Frankly, I do not want to reside in villages for long. I prefer my son to study in the city rather than in *xiangxia*. Every aspect of city life is better than that of *xiangxia*. In *xiangxia*, transportation is inconvenient, education is of low quality and every other aspect falls short. We can take walks along the river in the city, and all other aspects are significantly better. (S-Bo's mother)

Consequently, these rural parents' rejection of what they perceive as the "bad" rural education collectively generates three major challenges for the development of rural schools. First, since student enrolment numbers determine resource allocation, each student lost leads to a major decrease in the financial and human resources allocated to rural schools. One teacher lamented: "We have so few students that the funding [total per-student public expenditure] is insufficient for school operations, such as the cost of electricity, repairing broken facilities" (T-Pang). Second, all six rural principals stated that the continual loss of students reduced their schools' ability to acquire new teachers, while at the same time making it easier for rural teachers to obtain teaching positions in urban schools where there were now teacher shortages: "Our school lacks [enough] teachers because many *peidu* children flock to our school every year. To solve this problem, we recruit many good teachers from rural and township schools" (P-Gao from a county-seat school). Third, over 80 per cent of the rural teachers indicated that students with better academic performance and behaviour were more likely to leave rural schools: "Once we cultivate a good student ... parents think that their child is good at studying and so they then transfer them to the township school" (T-Guo).

These factors have impeded the development of rural schools and rural education. We found that in the area under study, having fewer students, especially good ones, dampened the rural teachers' enthusiasm for teaching, as "No students respond to my teaching" (T-Tian) and "only four or five students reading [in class] ... results in a bad teaching environment" (T-Hu). Moreover, losing peers "weakens the remaining students' motivation to study" (School Tan's principal).

Rural teachers' and parents' deliberate withdrawal from rural education and rural communities stems from their negative perceptions of rural schools, which are shaped by an urban benchmark under the discourse of rural inferiority. Nevertheless, these rural teachers and parents do not blame

themselves for being rural nor do they identify with this sense of inferiority. Instead, they actively construct a subtractive image of rural schools and a collective identity as becoming less rural to detach themselves and their children from the rural schools they perceive as bad. However, by regarding departure as a solution to rural–urban educational inequalities, they may further impede the narrowing of this gap. Their departure reinforces others’ negative perceptions of rural schools and encourages and justifies their abandonment of them, too. This ultimately generates a vicious cycle of school underdevelopment in rural education.

Discussion: Rectifying Educational Inequalities Beyond Structural Constraints

The existing literature on rural education focuses on unequal resource distribution and calls for distributive approaches to resolve the rural–urban education gap.⁵³ However, our study shows that a narrow emphasis on distributive justice while neglecting the cultural misrecognition of rurality in modern society is insufficient to resolve or mitigate the cumulative disadvantages in rural school development. Our findings indicate the need to go beyond the dominant rural–urban dichotomy discourse by bringing a cultural perspective to analysing and rectifying rural education inequality.

In this study, rural teachers’ and parents’ unfavourable perceptions of rural education, and their subsequent departure from rural locations, stem from their awareness of the current rural–urban structural inequalities in modern China. This awareness leads them to actively seek solutions or paths of resistance, such as leaving for urban jobs or schools. However, while acknowledging their active agency, we note that their cultural production processes regarding rural schools are still constrained by the rural–urban dualism. Specifically, informed by cultural production theory, we argue that, unlike the “lads” in Willis’s study⁵⁴ or the marginalized youth identified by Hatt⁵⁵ who challenged the dominant ideology of pursuing academic success for upward social mobility, rural teachers and parents in our study do not recognize rural–urban cultural inequalities, nor do they confront the symbolic bias against rural schools that has been constructed by a discourse of rural inferiority. Instead, they appear to internalize this inferiority discourse, using it to explain their observations of rural schools and justify their departure from rural education and rural life. Consequently, their de-ruralized self-identities and departure strategies offer only a limited solution to rural–urban education inequalities while at the same time hindering rural school improvement and weakening rural people’s commitment to rural development.

Hence, we believe that the processes of reproducing and accumulating rural–urban education inequalities should be culturally revisited in two aspects: the construction of a discourse of rural inferiority in individual–social system interactions and the prevailing cultural misrecognition of rurality in education.

First, the discourse of rural inferiority, which leads rural teachers and parents to perceive the quality of rural education as poor, does not arise in a vacuum; it is rooted in the growth of urbanization in modern society.⁵⁶ David Harvey argues that cities in coastal areas have advantages over remote rural areas in terms of the ease of movement. Consequently, prioritizing construction in large cities can result in investment clustering, profit maximization and benefits for flexible capital accumulation and circulation.⁵⁷ In China, urbanization and industrialization in cities have taken precedence over agricultural development in villages for decades, particularly since the reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放).⁵⁸ This urban-biased national strategic development has resulted in a

53 Cuervo 2016; Zhang 2019.

54 Willis 1977.

55 Hatt 2007.

56 Cuervo 2016.

57 Harvey 2014.

58 Unger 2002.

rural–urban income gap (1:2.5 in 2021)⁵⁹ and disparities in resource distribution for infrastructure and public services.⁶⁰ In confronting these entrenched structural disparities, rural people have further cultivated a cultural ideology in which rurality is typically constructed in opposition to urban spaces in modern societies, portraying rural life as the disadvantaged “other.”⁶¹ This means that the conception of rurality is now interpreted more with metro-centric values than the local values of rural communities.⁶² Thus, the more rural parents and teachers perceive rural China as stagnant and their rural experiences as unpleasant, the more they will expect their children and themselves to become “less rural.”⁶³

Second, teachers and parents not only legitimize urban schools as the standard for what constitutes a good school, but it appears that despite their differing educational levels and occupational positions, neither group could easily recognize the advantages of rurality in terms of the natural environment, traditional and evolving culture, and lifestyles that could contribute to rural school development and their children’s future pursuits. Their underestimation of rural schools’ capability in development might be caused by a persistent urban-biased curriculum⁶⁴ that has informed and intensified the devaluation of rurality among rural teachers and parents during their school time and probably also in their later adulthood – for example, in teacher training programmes.⁶⁵ As scholars have noted, the “rural” is often seen as problematic and is devalued within the education system. In contrast, teachers, parents and children tend to highly value and admire the knowledge and lifestyle associated with the “urban.”⁶⁶

To address the inequalities faced by rural education and promote rural development, we draw researchers’ and policymakers’ attention to the cultural processes that generate urban-biased ideologies and the cultural misrecognition of rurality. First, we advocate for a reframing of the concept of rurality in governmental policies and scholarship to inspire resistance against the rural inferiority discourse in individuals’ interactions with the social system. Since 2017, the Chinese government has notably implemented rural revitalization as a national strategy via political actions primarily focused on infrastructure construction, economic development and public services.⁶⁷ Our study suggests that such political actions cannot be effective without a turnaround in people’s interpretation of rurality. Hence, the cultural recognition dimension should not only be embraced but also prioritized in rural revitalization policy initiatives to establish a foundation for transforming China’s urban-biased development in the new era.

Moreover, it is clear that unless rurality and local knowledge from rural communities are regarded as equally important as urbanity within the education system, rural education cannot be effectively linked to rural community development. As a result, its potential for fostering positive development will not be realized. As expounded by Paris and Samy Alim, it is imperative to value the resources and knowledge funds that poor and minority students bring, as well as to recognize the ongoing cultural practices in their home communities.⁶⁸ One potential approach is to undertake a comprehensive review of school curricula and textbooks, as well as teacher education and training programmes, replacing the long-standing urban-biased school knowledge with a curriculum and pedagogy that emphasizes the significance of traditional and evolving funds of knowledge from rural areas and

59 National Bureau of Statistics 2022.

60 Zhang 2019.

61 Cuervo 2016.

62 Wilson, Hu and Rahman 2018.

63 Xing and Zhang 2017; Zhu and Liu 2019.

64 Li 2020.

65 Guo and Zhao 2023.

66 Corbett 2007.

67 State Council 2018.

68 Paris 2012; Paris and Alim 2014.

promotes positive images of rurality. By embracing rurality and connecting with rural communities in educational practices, rural schools can play a significant role in the cultural, social and even economic development of the countryside, ultimately contributing to rural revitalization.

Unlike the rural schools we examined, some in China and elsewhere have recently experimented with such practices. Take Dazu 达祖 and Fanjia 范家 primary schools, located in villages in Sichuan province, as examples. Although these schools had previously performed poorly, like the rural schools in this study, the two principals integrated their curriculum with ecological agriculture and local traditional and contemporary culture. They also guided teachers to actively engage in eco-agriculture alongside villagers to promote local economic and cultural development.⁶⁹ As a result, student performance improved, and some students who had previously transferred to urban schools returned. Similarly, by constructing a positive evaluation of rurality in education, schools in rural England⁷⁰ and sparsely populated areas of Sweden⁷¹ have become the heart of their communities, enhancing young people's social capital and ultimately benefiting the survival of the villages and their people.

Through the example of rural schools in China, we clarify that the processes of structural reproduction and cultural production are not independent causes of rural–urban educational inequalities. Rather, both processes are mutually produced and reinforced and should be regarded as equally important when seeking solutions to such inequality. Therefore, we call for further examination of these cultural processes when promoting school development in disadvantaged rural communities and rectifying the cumulative inequalities.

Conclusion

Evidence from Gongshui county shows that rural teachers and parents have constructed a negative perception of rural schools, which is shaped by the devalued meanings ascribed to three artefacts: schools' physical appearance, the characteristics of the teaching staff and students' academic scores. Their negative views of rural education are underpinned by both an awareness of structural disparities in educational resources and an underlying cultural discourse of rural inferiority. The engagement of teachers and parents in internalizing and reinforcing this cultural discourse leads them to cultivate a collective identity of becoming "less" rural and adopting departure strategies to disconnect their children and themselves from rural education and rural communities. This cultural production of "bad" rural schools perpetuates and reinforces the underdevelopment of schools in rural China, a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. While our findings indicate that the negative perception of rural schools did not significantly differ by gender, class or generation, future research could explore how these intersecting dynamics shape rural individuals' images of rural education.

We suggest that while the underdevelopment of rural schools initially stems from structural inequalities in resource distribution, a lack of awareness of the cultural processes that stigmatize rural schools as inferior makes improvements in their development more difficult to achieve. Thus, our study emphasizes the necessity of altering the constructed perception of "bad" rural schools and reframing the discourse of rural inferiority by transforming the urban-biased development strategies in modern China and addressing cultural misrecognition of rurality in the education system.

We encourage future studies to adopt a critical cultural perspective on rural education and the development of disadvantaged schools, both within and beyond China. We also recommend that policymakers in China and elsewhere consider the processes of cultural production, as these can not only generate and perpetuate educational inequalities but also resist and rectify them.

⁶⁹ Han 2019.

⁷⁰ Bagley and Hillyard 2011.

⁷¹ Beach et al. 2019.

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Yuan TENG is an associate professor at the Faculty of Education at Central China Normal University. Her research focuses on rural development and rural education, especially the relationship between education and rural development.

Jiaxin CHEN is an assistant professor at the department of applied social sciences at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her research focuses on the sociology of education, migration and urbanization. She is particularly interested in research on rural–urban migration, academic mobility and educational inequality.