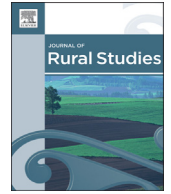




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From a virtuous cycle of rural-urban education to urban-oriented rural basic education in China: An explanation of the failure of China's Rural School Mapping Adjustment policy

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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

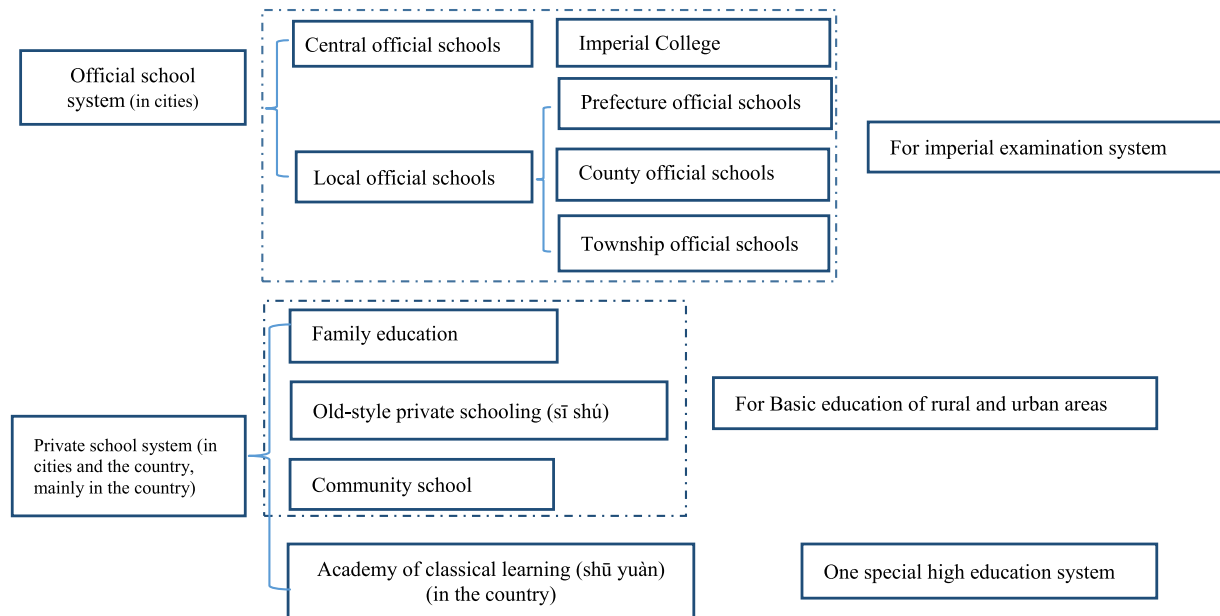


Fig. 1. The ancient Chinese education system and school mapping.

forms including family education, old-style private schooling (*sī shù*) and community schools. In rural areas, in addition to private schools and family education, there were also “community schools”. “Suburban schools” in the Tang Dynasty, “winter schools” in the Song Dynasty and “community schools” in the Ming and Qing Dynasties were schools that were all funded and established by the local gentries under the relevant policies of the imperial court, with the aim of impart agricultural knowledge and offering primary and moral education. Ancient Chinese urban and rural primary education was mainly provided by private schools in urban and rural areas. Almost all forms of ancient Chinese primary education, including palace education for royal officials and private families and school education for ordinary citizens, were completed in private schools of a relatively low level (Yang and Wu, 2012). Higher education was mainly provided in the advanced stage of the city’s official and private schools, such as the “academy of classical learning” (*shū yuàn*); its predecessor was the “lectures” (*jiǎng xué*) in the spring and autumn period, which later developed into “a school spreading Confucianism” (*jīng shè*) in the Han and Tang Dynasties, witnessed its heyday as the “academy of classical learning” in the Song and Yuan Dynasties and became rigid (transformed into official schools) in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The academy of classical learning was an important pillar of higher education institutions with Chinese characteristics, developing a few distinctive traditions of education, such as free lectures, academic creativity, a harmonious relationship between teachers and students, and self-study and debate.

Whether primary education or higher education, education in urban and rural areas embodied an “undifferentiated unity”. This unity refers to the same requirements for urban and rural education in the teaching material and purpose: they were both devoted to the teaching and learning of Confucian classics to screen talents and educate the public, with the ultimate aim of maintaining the rule of a hereditary monarchy. In terms of the learning material, the Confucian classics were a must. A basic method of teaching and learning Chinese Confucianism was to read the Confucian classics, which was not only a knowledge system but also a code of conduct that was taught and that served as a rule of human behaviour. In the Confucian classics, knowledge, belief and behaviour were closely

integrated. By reading these classics, people were imbued with an upbringing, beliefs and a way of life in addition to the acquisition of knowledge.

Based on the “undifferentiated unity” of urban-rural education, there was a virtuous cycle in which urban and rural education reinforced each other. In ancient China, under the system of rural education, students studied part-time and performed farm work part-time. The majority of Chinese people studied in rural areas and later became government officials in cities. Finally, most people returned to rural areas for various reasons, including waiting for a vacancy, filial mourning or retirement. This was more than a circulation of persons; it was also a multi-channel flow of information and capital that placed the entire society in a constant cycle. Therefore, it can be said that the relationship between traditional Chinese urban and rural education is an “undifferentiated unity” that forms a virtuous cycle. Regarding the imperial examination system, it made the bureaucracy and the civil ruling class increasingly reliant on the imperial power, which consolidated and strengthened the unified imperial power. Meanwhile, the unity of a political and ideological centre, combined with greater social mobility, made the education structure not only rigid but also flexible. On the one hand, the internal adjustment within the structure was strengthened; on the other hand, it failed to respond to the trend of modernization. Regardless, the main aim of traditional Chinese urban and rural education was to cultivate elites “who excel in learning can be officials” (*xué ér yōu zé shì*). The Confucian ethics it followed closely fit into the social fabric of rural agricultural civilization. The virtuous cycle of traditional Chinese urban and rural education, based on an “undifferentiated unity”, was in perfect harmony with rural society. As Marx (1965) observed, “the history of east Asia is an undifferentiated unity of urban and rural areas”. Economically, agricultural production was the economic lifeline, and rural areas were production centres. Under a policy of physiocracy that emphasized agriculture and restrained commerce, the development of the city’s commodity economy was only complementary of and subordinate to agricultural production. Politically, the city was the political centre entrenched by the imperial power and government offices. Although there was a powerful squirearchy in the country, it was

subject to the domination of the city and the emperor. Regarding the management and household registration system, there was no strict distinction between the municipal and rural affairs, with both managed by county-level officials during the time from the Qin and Han Dynasties to the late Qing Dynasty. Thus, the rural-urban relationships, which featured a common and undifferentiated management, cultivated an undifferentiated unity of the urban-rural education system and school mapping.

2.2. The modern education system and school restructuring with urban-rural disparities from the late Qing dynasty to the founding of the PRC (1949)

After the Opium War (1840), China underwent a thorough and dramatic transformation from a traditional agricultural society to a modernized society wrought by Western-dominated globalization as the direct consequence of the expansion of European culture across the planet via Europeans' settlement, colonization and cultural replication (Waters, 2001). With the decline of the Qing Dynasty and the influx of Western powers in modernity, the traditional agricultural economy in China gradually disintegrated, exacerbating the confrontation and contradiction between urban and rural China. Under these circumstances, shouldered with the responsibility of "saving the nation from subjugation and ensuring its survival", urban and rural education in China gradually deviated from the values and spiritual and cultural dimensions of Confucianism, giving way to a modern, scientific and rational education.

In 1905, the imperial examination system was completely abolished, and the transformation of the traditional education model was basically completed when the Republic was established in 1912. In the modern education system and school mapping (see Fig. 2), the "Imperial Academy", referring to the Imperial College and run by the Board of Education, was established, with prefecture and county official schools transforming into secondary schools and various forms of primary schools (based on private schools) transforming into public primary schools. The higher education institutions in the country, such as the "academy of classical

learning", gradually declined in rural areas and finally retreated from there. As a result of these changes, higher education was not available in rural areas and was confined to cities, leaving rural areas with only elementary education.

Undergoing twists and turns, modern primary schools finally gained a foothold in rural China. Viewed from a national scale, the number of primary school students stood at 2,795,475 in 1911 but increased by nearly three times to 10,948,979 in 1930 (Hao, 2002). In urban society, modern schools finally won people's favour and became one of the main channels of social mobility. However, the promotion of modern primary schools in rural China, known as "bring literacy to the countryside" (Fei, 1992, 1998), met constant resistance in rural areas as rural residents "preferred old-style private schools and stayed away from primary schools" (qīn sī shù, yuǎn xué táng) before the situation ultimately changed after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The reasons for the resistance to modern education in rural society lay in the following facts:

- A. Imperial education focusing on the Confucian classics was replaced by modern education imparting Western scientific knowledge. Tremendous changes occurred in modern primary schools in their teaching materials, curricula, management systems and school infrastructures, making them incompatible with traditional rural society. According to statistics, in ordinary schools of the late Qing Dynasty, traditional classics only accounted for 27.1% of the knowledge taught, whereas the percentage of modern knowledge including math, physics and chemistry reached 72.9% (Yuan, 1990). The teaching material and teaching methods were changed to adapt to the "modern world", which cultivated talents who were inconsistent with the standards and requirements of traditional values. This made the modern schools unable to promote the continuation and development of rural culture, causing a disruption in and degeneration of rural culture.
- B. The failure to promote modern education in rural areas can also be attributed to a lack of funding from the government and

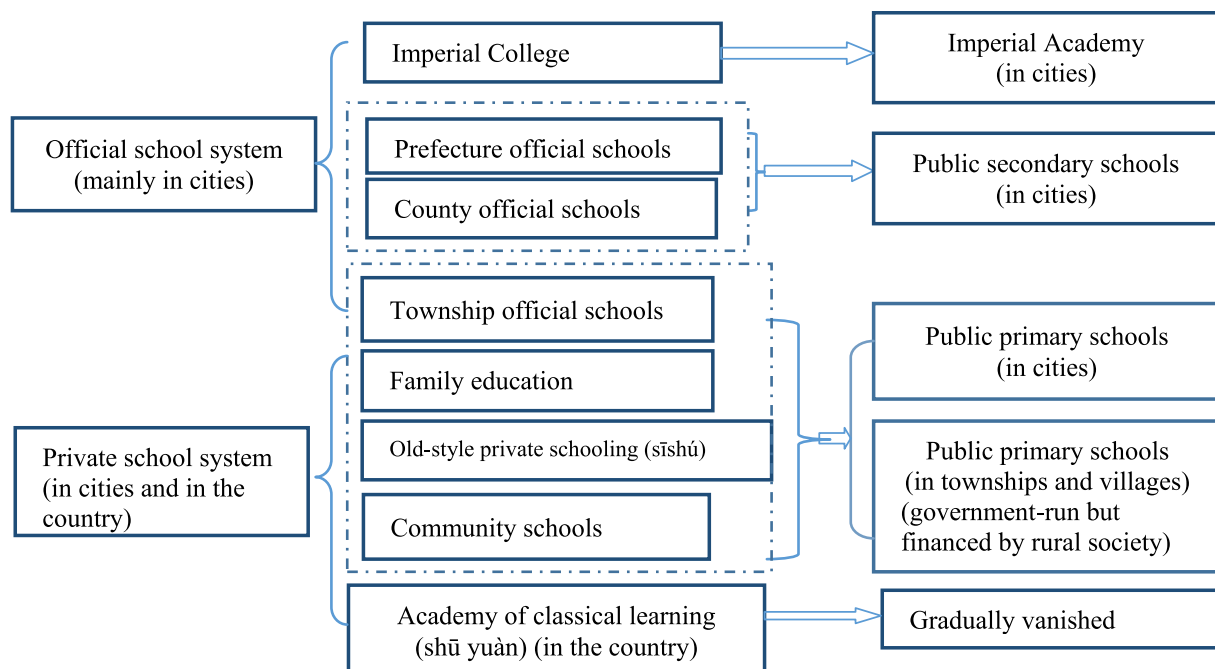


Fig. 2. The transformation of the education system and school mapping from ancient China to modern China.

motivation from the rural areas. Under the education system in the late Qing Dynasty and at the beginning of the Republic of China, local education expenditures were pooled by the local society, which was in line with traditional private schools. The difference was that traditional private schools were established by local communities with the aim of educating the public and winning fame as well as official ranks whereas modern primary schools were promoted under the pressure of modernization, imposed by higher-level governments. As a result, local communities did not take the initiative to run these modern primary schools; in addition, they were also suffering from an economic depression, leading to a lack of financial support.

- C. Since modernity, the outcome of modern education in rural areas allowed for little optimism, given that there was a common trend in which the number of people who received education dwindled and the average literacy rate gradually decreased. There were an increasing number of dropouts from poverty-stricken families after this reform. Although the imperial examination was drawbacks-laden, at least it held an unbiased attitude towards the rich and poor. Although “in terms of modern primary schools, students who live near the urban areas attend schools and those living in remote areas do not, people who are powerful attend schools and those who are poor do not” (Luo, 2006). In addition, the abolition of the imperial examination system destroyed the tradition of screening political talents through exams that had existed since the Sui and Tang Dynasties, meaning that the only path of social mobility at that time was blocked, which greatly weakened people’s enthusiasm to receive school education. Compared to old-style private schools, modern schools were less flexible. Children were required to pay fees to receive education, but the poor simply could not afford the cost.
- D. The negative impact that modern education exerted on folk beliefs also led to frequent conflicts. The majority of modern primary schools were built in temples to save school expenditures. The movement by officials who “destroyed the statues of Buddha in the temple to turn temples into schools” (*fèi miào xīng xué*) offended rural residents, who in turn often destroyed the schools.

There was no longer a virtuous cycle between urban and rural education, with the traditional rural social structure (gentry society) collapsing and the rural areas becoming trapped in a dark age “devoid of intellectuals”. The reform of the imperial examination system and the decay of rural areas prevented a return of rural elites to their hometowns, undermining the virtuous cycle between traditional Chinese urban and rural education. Under the new system, students got closer to cities but remained alienated from rural areas; many people settled in cities to pursue their careers after graduating from universities (including secondary schools in early times) and were even buried there after their death. A disruption in the previous cycle caused a collapse of the authority of the traditional gentry in the countryside. With the original candidates for gentleman leaving, unqualified people undertook this position, which increasingly weakened the sacred prestige of the gentry (Wu and Fei, 1988; Fei, 1953). The collapse of the gentry changed the basis of the traditional social structure of rural China. Fei (1953) extended the concept of “a physical erosion of land” to the social process and rural life in general to refer to the damage to the conservation and promotion of talents and human resources in modern China. With the implementation of modern education, rural areas gradually became eroded, alienated and abandoned in the development of China, which resulted in the fact that economically disadvantaged rural areas also lagged behind in terms of culture and education, resulting in a gradual alienation of

traditional rural society.

2.3. *The contemporary Chinese rural education system and school mapping restructuring after the founding of the PRC (1949)*

2.3.1. *1949–2000: a government-run and local society-financed rural basic education system*

After experiencing tremendous social reconstruction, including wars, revolutions, land reforms and socialist transformation, rural residents felt pride in becoming the master of the nation and completely accepted modern education. Motivated by the grand goal of “building a socialist country”, they committed themselves to the development of modern grass-roots education schools, i.e., primary and secondary schools in rural areas. The national enrolment rate of primary school students increased from 20% in 1949 to 84.7% in 1965; the number of primary schools and secondary schools across the entire nation rose from 526,964 and 4298 in 1952 to 1,681,939 and 18,102 in 1965, respectively (NBS, 2015), basically forming a school layout structure in which “each village has its own schools, which are located near the residential areas, and students can receive primary and secondary education in villages and rural areas”. During the period from 1949 when the new nation was founded to 1978 when the rural reforms began, the rural community witnessed an increase in primary schools. In addition, secondary schools were also made basically universal.

Since 1978, with the aim of enlarging the scope and accelerating the process of modern education, the majority of a limited amount of educational funds was invested in higher education, key primary and secondary schools and urban compulsory education. Meanwhile, the financing of basic education in China had rapidly moved away from a centralized system with a narrow revenue base to a decentralized system with a diversified revenue base (Mun, 1996). In terms of rural compulsory education, a policy of multi-channel financing was implemented that favoured “the running and management of primary education by the people themselves”. The township government took on the administrative responsibilities of rural basic education. This policy gave rise to a heavy financial burden on local people in villages and a number of rural primary and secondary schools, which were small in size and had fewer qualified teachers and a low quality of teaching because each village had its own primary schools and each township had its secondary schools. With rural residents contributing their own share in the development of primary education, nine-year compulsory education was basically popularized, and illiteracy among young adults was eliminated in rural areas.

2.3.2. *From 2000 to the present: a government-run and government-financed rural basic education system*

Since 2000, the Chinese central government has made important adjustments to the unequal relationship between urban and rural areas. Over the past 15 years, the Chinese government has been constantly increasing the input in rural education including transfer payments and investments in special projects. Enrolment in public rural schools has been free since 2001, entering the period of “government-run and government-financed” and promoting the shift from a rural basic education mainly funded by rural inhabitants to a public-run education, with the aim of giving impetus to the long-term development of rural education. In 2004, the Chinese government’s budgetary appropriation for rural basic education totalled RMB132.6 billion, which was RMB79.3 billion more than in 1999, accounting for 76.6% of the nation’s total spending on rural basic education at RMB164.5 billion, and an 18.8% increase over the 1999 figure (Ding, 2008). The 2008 Government Work Report proposed by then-premier Wen Jiabao stated that funding for rural compulsory education is now fully provided by the

government budget. All 150 million students receiving compulsory education in rural areas are exempt from paying tuition and miscellaneous fees and are supplied with free textbooks, and living allowances are provided to the 7.8 million students from poor families who reside in school dormitories. The plan to make nine-year compulsory education basically universal and to basically eliminate illiteracy among young and middle-aged adults in the western region was implemented on schedule. The state allocated special funds to support the renovation of dilapidated buildings at more than 22,000 rural primary and secondary schools and the building of more than 7000 schools with student dormitory facilities. Distance education (Li et al., 2014) now covers 360,000 rural primary and middle schools, making quality education available to more rural students. Simultaneously, the central government has shifted the administrative power of rural basic education from the township level to the county level.

Under these circumstances, the RSMA, which discourages the running of primary and secondary schools in villages and townships, was initiated in 2001. The formal central government document stated that local governments can promote rural basic school mapping adjustment according to local circumstances to integrate public funding resources to improve the quality of rural basic education because of the continuous decrease in the number of rural school-age children as a result of the urbanization process and the Family Plan Policy initiated in the late 1970s. The detailed implementation of the adjustment was left to the regional governments, which are the county-level governments. The strategies adopted and implemented in most counties were “no primary schools in villages and no secondary schools in townships”, with the result that the previous rural school mapping of “one primary school in a village and one secondary school in a township” changed into “one primary boarding school in a township and secondary schools in a county” (see Fig. 3 and Table 1). The implication has been a rapid disappearance of the primary schools in most villages and of the secondary schools in most townships and an upward move in the location of rural basic education from the village and the township

to the township and the county. This trend is referred to as the “words-up-moving” concept (Xiong, 2009), as schools are moved to the administrative regions of an upper level. Simultaneously, there has been an increasing investment in merged schools located above the township level to improve the teaching and physical conditions of these schools. These were thought to promote a rational distribution and the effectiveness of educational resources. Simultaneously, however, the social costs have been increasing, such as the costs of student accommodation and transportation, children’s mental health problems as a result of leaving their community and families, an increasing rural secondary dropout rate (Yi et al., 2012), the huge waste of existing village-level educational resources, the overburdening of some merged schools and the challenge of boarding school student management. On the other hand, this rapid restructuring of rural school mapping means a dramatic change in rural community development. The quality of rural basic education, the social mobility of rural areas and other important aspects of rural development must be influenced. Yang (2010) finds a constantly decreasing percentage of rural students enrolled in key universities. The case study below shows how rural areas and actors have responded to the RSMA and its negative influence on rural society.

3. A case study: responses from rural society and actors to the RSMA as well as the social impact of urban-oriented rural education and the RSMA

Located in the western mountainous area of Q.L. County, Hebei Province, Li village is 65 km from the county, with a county road crossing it. There are a total number of 305 farmer households with a total population of 1200. It is home to 1100 mu (1 mu equals approximately 666.67 m²) of arable land and 26,000 mu of barren hills. Earning their income by working outside the village and farming, villagers often work in the construction, textile, and agricultural product transportation industries, among others. It is a mountainous and inconvenient area where relatively low-income

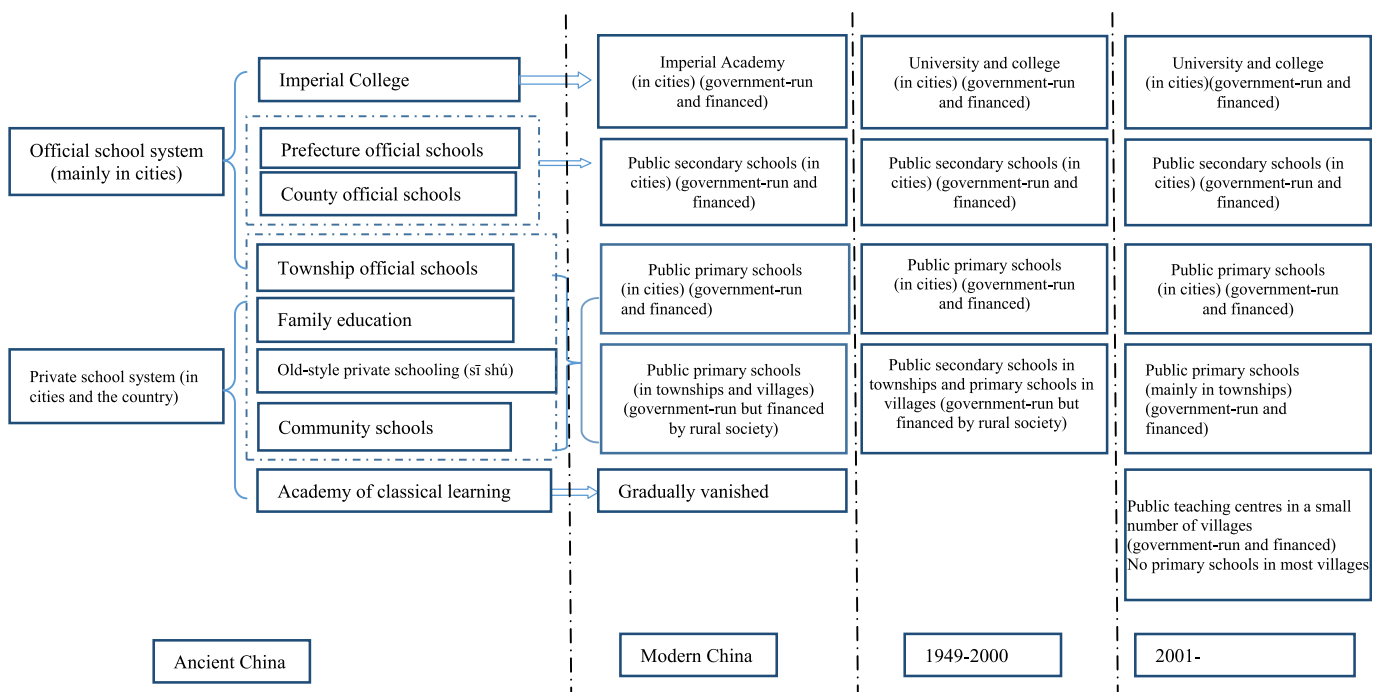


Fig. 3. The transformation of the education system and school mapping from ancient China to contemporary China.

Table 1

The changes in the rural school location in different administrative levels from ancient to contemporary China.

	Ancient China	Modern China	Contemporary China
Village	Flourishing private education	Public primary school	A small number of public teaching centres
Township	Flourishing private school Official school	Public primary school	Public primary school
County and City	Academy of classical learning Private school Official school Imperial College	Public primary and secondary school Imperial Academy	Public primary school and secondary school College and university

farmers live.

According to the villagers' accounts, the temple in the north of the village is often associated with early rural education. During the promotion of modern education in the late Qing Dynasty, the temple was used as a primary school. As a rural school, it underwent different historical periods, including the Anti-Japanese War, the War of Liberation, the land reform, the founding of the new nation and the period of the people's commune. In 1982, after the troops stationed in the village withdrew, the barracks built by central forces in the hillside of the village were utilized as schoolhouses for rural basic education. In 1991, with a collective investment of the village, a school was built near the main road in the east of the village. Costing a total amount of 120,000 yuan, 19 houses were built as classrooms, and a large playground was constructed. At that time, the primary school of Li village was a complete school with grades from one to six. There were more than 100 students in the school, with 20 distributed in each grade. Although the campus was hardly whitewashed and the playground was dusty, it was the best of times for the school because there were at least a schoolhouse and numerous full-time teachers and students. During recess, the school was filled with the buzz of the voices of frolicking students; during class, the classrooms were immersed in a learning atmosphere in which students read their textbooks aloud. The music of exercises between classes and broadcast announcements were heard all over the village, reassuring students' parents who were working on the farms.

In 2006, the RSMA policy began to be implemented. At that time, the County Education Bureau issued an instruction to withdraw and merge all village primary schools in that county, only retaining the Central Primary School in the township. As the people in charge of the withdrawal and merger of the primary schools, the principal of the Township Central Primary School discussed this issue with the committee. Village cadres and villagers were opposed to this instruction; Zhao Guoan, the local party secretary of Li village, commented that "the village primary school has been very good. If it is withdrawn, the children will need to go a long way to attend school. Not only is it difficult for the family to take care of their children but also it increases the economic burden on farmers, which leads to a dual 'spiritual' and 'economic' loss on the farmers' side". Due to the opposition of village cadres, the original plan to withdraw the 5th and 6th grades of the village primary school was postponed one year later to 2007. In that year, the township education committee directly informed the teachers of the decision to withdraw and merge without discussing it with villagers in advance. The children and parents did not know about it until the first day of school. In 2008, the 3rd and 4th grades were removed. After two rounds of withdrawal and merger in 2007 and 2008, the village primary school was transformed from a complete primary school to a teaching school, retaining only the first and second grades. In 2012, there were only 16 first-year and 8 s-year students in the village primary school, with two teachers on the regular payroll. In terms of the two rows of schoolhouses, the first row is now used as the office of the village committee and party branch

and the second row still used as classrooms.

Faced with the adjustment of the village primary school, the villagers are in a reluctant mood; they have no choice but to passively accept the fact that, as Yuan Bin, a villager, said, "the decision is already made by the superior. Even the village officials have no way out, let alone us". The withdrawal of schools from rural communities negatively affected the culture and cohesive power of the village, accelerating the migration of villagers to cities and the decline of rural areas. A more direct impact is exerted on the education of the villagers. In responses to the adjustment of the village primary school, families with different economic conditions make different choices, generating a new differentiation in the village. A total of 100% of the 1st–2nd-year children attended the teaching school in Li village regardless of their families' income. In terms of 3rd–6th-year children, those coming from relatively poor families in the village attended the township central primary school, accounting for 34.9% of the total students. A total of 58.1% of them attended the county private primary school, with their family's economic condition ranking in the middle in the entire village. The relatively wealthy group of this village selected the key public primary school in the county, accounting for 7% of the entire population. There is a similar situation for the secondary school-age children, as demonstrated in Tables 2 and 3.

3.1. Poor families

Poor families must send their children to the Township Central Primary School ("the state run primary school", as the villagers call it) after their children finish the 2nd year in the village teaching school, given that they are offered government subsidies, an exemption for the tuition and accommodation fees as well as a meal subsidy and are only required to pay for transportation. Children from poor families typically enter the county public schools for rural children; those performing badly in their studies drop out even before finishing the first year in secondary schools.

A villager named Hui Dangpin: Hui Dangpin has a 17-year-old son. With his wife suffering from disease, Hui Dangpin supports a family with financial difficulty in Li village. His son finished the preschool class and the first three years of primary education in the village primary school. Due to the withdrawal and merger of the school, he went to study in the township central primary school. Initially, he kept good grades, but later, with a lax regulation of the school, he became lazy and lagged behind in his studies. After graduating from the primary school, instead of entering the private junior high school in the county as the majority of his classmates did, he furthered his study in the XL secondary school (a county public school (regional)), which cost relatively little. Nonetheless, he still dropped out of school to work in Tianjin in the second year of junior high school due to his family's difficulty in affording the school fees. Hui Dangpin said that it was his son's own choice; because of the poor financial condition, rather than continue his study, his son preferred to work to make money and then came back to build a house, get married and live a good life.

Table 2
Schools attended by the school-age children in Li village in 2012.

Grade	Schools' name	School type	Number of students	Percentage
1st–2nd years of primary school	The teaching centre in Li village	Day school	24	100%
3rd–6th years of primary school	The township central primary school	Boarding school	15	34.9%
	The county private primary school	Boarding school	25	58.1%
	The county public primary school (key school)	Day school	3	7.0%
Secondary school	The (regional) county public secondary school	Boarding school	15	38.4%
	The county private secondary school	Boarding school	20	51.3%
	The county public secondary school (key school)	Day school	4	10.3%

Table 3
Features of the schools for students from Li village.

Grade	Locations	Categories	Features
1st–2nd years of primary school	Village	Public teaching centre	Tuition-free, near the children's homes, easy for children to be taken care of, two responsible teachers
3rd–6th years of primary school	Township	Public primary boarding school	Exempt from tuition and accommodation fees, part of board expenses exempted; requires a payment of part of the board expenses and transportation from the village to the township, 2 yuan/time; a poor quality of teaching, management and living conditions, poor infrastructure; students generally come from poor families with unhealthy parents who are unable to work outside the village or who do not attach much importance to education.
	County	Private primary boarding school	Requires a payment of tuition worth 1250 yuan/semester, an accommodation fee of 100 yuan/semester, board expenses costing 450 yuan/semester and transportation expenses of 15 yuan/time; a strict management, good living conditions and good quality of teaching; students are from moderate-income or wealthy families that value education. The majority of parents go to work in the county, and some try very hard to buy a house in the county to take care of their children.
	County	Public key primary school	A low tuition and good teaching quality and management; students come from wealthy families with some powerful connections, and their parents are capable of affording a house in the county. Some of the families are registered as urban residents.
Secondary school	County	Public regional boarding secondary school	Students are from economically disadvantaged families, and over 80% of them drop out of the school for work in the 2nd year of secondary school.
	County	Private boarding secondary school	Students are from moderate-income or wealthy families. The majority of parents go to work in the county, and some try very hard to buy a house in the county to take care of their children.
	County	Public key secondary school	Students come from wealthy families with some powerful connections, with the majority of parents choosing to buy a house in the county. Some of the families are registered as urban residents.

The harsh reality has forced a great number of children from rural households, particularly poverty-stricken families, to drop out of junior high school. "Now, there are many rural students quitting school during the junior secondary education, as they lag behind in their studies. Although they are exempted from tuition fees, there are other costly expenses, which are great burdens for economically disadvantaged families. Because study is not a way out, they are left with no choice but to work in towns or cities!" Children from poor rural families can hardly receive extra support from their parents; with a relatively weak level of competitiveness and high economic burdens, they are prone to quitting school.

3.2. Middle-class families

The observation of Li village shows that middle-class farmers choose to send their children to study in schools that they deem good, i.e., private primary schools in the county, and even go to work in the county to support their children's study. Private primary school entails higher tuition costs but better overall conditions, including teaching, management and particularly the children's quality of life.

A villager named Zhejie: the older son of Zhejie once studied in the township central primary school. She is firmly against the withdrawal and merger of the village primary school and is very dissatisfied with the township primary school. She said that her son was still very young when he attended the township school. The diet in the school was so bad that he suffered from a stomach ache each spring. She went to see the students' dormitory, which,

according to her, was very wet and unclean. Although heating was available in winter, it was not as warm as the home. Subsequently, she sent her son to the YH primary school (a county private primary school) in the county, costing a total of 1250 yuan a semester, including a tuition fee of 1050 yuan, books that cost 100 yuan, an accommodation fee of 100 yuan and transportation from the village to the county, which costs 15 yuan/time. By contrast, the first three costs are exempted in the township central primary school, which only charges a transportation fee of 2 yuan/time. Although it involves a longer distance and a higher cost, Zhejie still chooses to have her son attend the primary school in the county, and she finds a job in the canteen of the YH primary school to look after her son while working.

3.3. Rich families

A few wealthy families with some "powerful connections" or those capable of becoming residents of county school districts choose to have their children attend the public primary schools in the county so that their children can enjoy a higher quality of urban public education. The situation is also the same with secondary school. Rich families send their children to private schools in the county; children from families with some "powerful connections" or those capable of becoming residents of county school districts are sent to public schools for urban residents.

Since 2000, there has been a widely appreciated argument that, as China emerges as a global economic super-power and accelerates urbanization, challenges arise for the Chinese government in

ensuring that rural regions can adequately supply resources including food, land and labour and avoid political instability by reducing the growing prosperity gap between urban and rural regions (Long and Woods, 2011). Thus, the Chinese government has made a major adjustment since 2001 and has been constantly increasing the input in rural education over the past 15 years with the aim of giving impetus to the long-term development of rural education and decreasing the huge disparity in the access to education between rural and urban areas. Using provincial data from 1997 to 2005, Zhao (2009) finds that, by the end of 2005, there was a substantial decrease in the rural-urban gap, the regional disparity, and the overall inequality in per student budgetary expenditures and total spending. However, Wang and Zhao (2012) argue that the reforms did not show any significant impact on reducing the gap in the level of educational spending between rural and urban areas nor did they alleviate the inequality in educational revenue and spending across provinces or between rural and urban areas. So it is still controversial that whether the growth of government financial support to rural basic education decreases the disparities between urban and rural area, which remains to be observed. While the “urban priority and urban-oriented” school mapping restructuring has encouraged the centralization of basic schools in urban areas and upper levels. It is undeniable that the path of the RSMA puts the poor in villages at a greater disadvantage. From this perspective, the “withdrawal and merger of schools” fail to promote equity in education; on the contrary, they result in a new form of injustice undermining and withering rural society:

- A. The RSMA is drafted and implemented to improve economic efficiency and promote rural residents to migrate to urban areas and become involved in the process of marketization, commercialization and monetization (Mok, 2005). Within this globalized context, “efficiency” has been given the highest priority in China. However, the poor cannot handle the challenges of the change. The case study presents an example of rural society in the process of school mapping. The disparity between urban and rural education compels farmers to send their children to study in urban schools, making rural areas further alienated from urban areas and leading to an enlarged gap between the rich and the poor. The previous gap between urban and rural education means imbalanced education resources in urban and rural areas due to the restriction of the household registration system; currently, the gap is not only caused by the household registration system but also influenced by various factors, including family economic conditions, family connections and the parents’ education consciousness. It can be said that there exist a deeper and more far-reaching rural and urban alienation and stratification between the rich and the poor.
- B. The rapid restructuring under urban-oriented and efficiency-first development strategies results in painful experiences in rural people’s lifestyle, ethics, morals and beliefs, which may lead to a severe social and spiritual crisis. Although the enrolment in public rural schools has been free as a result of government’s public financial support since 2001, a sample survey conducted in 2005 showed that the average dropout rate of 17-year-old rural junior high school students was approximately 43% (Yuan and Xie, 2005), which means that not all students can finish the 9-year compulsory education (Liu, 2004). This will lead to a reduced chance for rural residents to improve their social status. Students who quit school undergo a transformation of “passive” dropouts, i.e., students who cannot afford the tuition and passively give up their study, into “active” dropout, i.e., students who are wearier of study, believing that “study is of no use”, and voluntarily quit school. On the surface, this is the farmers’ “rational” choice, given that “It is more

difficult to change our fate by knowledge, so it is better to quit school, migrate to work and make money as early as possible”. However, it is actually their passive choice under the urban-oriented rural education system and school layout because they cannot handle the challenges brought by them. The increasing dropout rate of rural schools especially in secondary schools can be explained by the dropouts’ disadvantaged socio-economic and cultural condition as well as the location of the public rural schools (Chung and Mason, 2012).

- C. There is a block for rural youth to return to the countryside. Urban-oriented rural education has served as a block for rural youth to return to the countryside as well. Rural education should shoulder a great responsibility for cultivating talents for urbanization and industrialization and, more importantly, for the development of rural areas and the revitalization of rural culture. However, in general, the recipients of rural education deviate from rural communities, as they aim to leave the countryside and agriculture to become part of the non-agricultural population. Rural culture was once a spiritual sanctuary for us in ancient China. However, “urban-oriented” education traps rural education, leading to a further loss of village-level basic education space as a result of school mapping restructuring after the loss of the traditional values and spirit in the modern Chinese educational reform. Young people who receive an education beyond the elementary level either migrate to cities and never return or return to their hometowns but are unable to adapt to country life.
- D. Although primary schools have encountered the resistance of rural people in the promotion of modern educational reforms since the late Qing Dynasty, primary schools in the village, which served as the only national institution and as a symbol of knowledge, played an irreplaceable role in the village after 1949. The primary schools in the village were closely integrated with farmers’ everyday lives. Their interaction with the rural areas was meaningful, and in terms of cultural history, the change in their functions over the decades was of unique significance (Li, 1999). The disappearance of schools from villages was a severe destruction of the culture of rural areas and integrated rural community life. As Long and Woods (2011) said: rural restructuring in China, shaped by national macroeconomic development strategies under globalization, continued to influence and alter the reality of rural society, including the everyday life of rural inhabitants.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Through the studies above, we believe that the reason for the failure of the RSMA is the directions and values of “urban priority and urban-oriented”, which should be reflected on and reconceived. Although we argue that the development of rural education cannot simply rely on a constant increase in government financial investment (naturally, this is the basic condition), what actually matters are the ideas, directions and purposes of rural education.

The value of rural basic education with “off rural areas” started in the late Qing Dynasty. Education in ancient China was characterized by an undifferentiated unity of the urban and rural education systems. Since the late Qing Dynasty, to cope with the challenges of globalization, China has started modernization, promoting modern education in the countryside, and the relationship between urban and rural areas had changed to a relationship in which urban areas exploited and oppressed rural areas. In the pursuit of national survival and rejuvenation, China promoted modern schools and “bringing literacy to the countryside” but simultaneously failed to maintain the continuation and development of traditional culture, causing a destruction of the traditional

structure of rural society and the education system. Rural education was restructured by the strategies of the state and experienced great changes in the traditional contents of teaching, methods of teaching and purposes of teaching. During the transformation of modern education, rural areas lost their importance in national education and the flourishing private schools. Traditional rural education gradually deviated from the values, the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Confucianism and traditional rural communities, giving way to a modern, scientific and rational education. Villages are gradually eroded by external forces, their ideology deviating and the role and influence of traditional culture declining, with the traditional culture finally dissolved by the external culture.

After the founding of PRC (1949), China has become involved in contemporary globalization (also referred to as 'neoliberal globalization' or 'second wave globalization') (Woods, 2007) and China has prioritized the development of cities and industrialization. From 1949 to 2000, the urban-rural relationship was characterized by farmers' and rural areas' support of industrialization and urban areas. Under the monopoly system for grain purchasing and marketing, the main function of rural areas was to provide agricultural surplus and inexpensive labour to reduce the costs of industrialization and accumulate industrial treasure. Under this "urban priority and urban-oriented" urban-rural relationship, Chinese urban education and rural education have embarked on an "urban priority and urban-oriented" path that has resulted in increasing disparities between the rural and urban education systems although Chinese rural education has been basically made universal in 1978. The educational gap between the urban and rural segments reflects both the widespread disparity in the level of economic development and the longstanding historical and socio-cultural differences between cities and the countryside (Li and Yang, 2013).

In order to tackle the challenges of the disparity between urban and rural education system, rural education has been financed increasingly by central government since 2001. The RSMA, which was expected to decrease the disparity between the urban and rural education systems and to improve the quality of rural basic education, results in a spatial restructuring of primary and junior secondary schools, accompanied by a subsequent restructuring of fund resource allocation and education accessibility. All of these changes present a number of challenges to rural people, given that their possibility of upward social mobility is closely related to education. The case study on Li village indicates that the economic condition of farmers determines their choice of school. Economically disadvantaged groups are even more vulnerable to the change in school locations and are further excluded and oppressed during this process. This differentiation becomes more severe and evident due to the government's school adjustment, which pushes rural schools away from rural communities. Poor rural households are more likely to be abandoned and forgotten in this process, forming a vicious cycle in which "the poor get poorer". From the case study, we conclude that the RSMA actually increased the gap between urban education and rural education, trapped the rural education and undermined rural society. The "urban priority and urban-oriented" value and purpose of the rural basic education system and school mapping adjustment are the fundamental reason for the failure of the RSMA, initiated in 2001. Although in September 2012, the State Council issued a document to suspend the removal and merger of rural basic schools,¹ it is extremely difficult to mitigate the negative impact on the already destitute rural areas. Can rural areas once again receive respect for their local culture and

education and gain balanced education resources to reconstitute a virtuous cycle of urban-rural relations? We believe that it is possible for us to rebuild a better rural education system and school mapping based on the needs of the rural community and rural people if rural and traditional cultural values and the rural community's rights of participation are fully respected and recognized during the course of Chinese social development.

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¹ General Office of the State Council's Opinions on Regulating the Mapping of Rural Compulsory Education Schools (2012). General Office of the State Council. Document No. 48.

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