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Rural Sociology 0(0), 2023, pp. 1–25
DOI: 10.1111/ruso.12478
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Rural Lifestyles and Life Politics: Reimagining Modernity in the Development of a Future Village in China

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Abstract Lifestyles signify who people are and who people want to be. They contain one's value orientation toward the world. The speeding urbanization over the globe has made the urban lifestyle mainstream, and so does it in China. The overwhelming range of options in cities represents a consumerist society, but meanwhile, there is an emergent underground alternative, especially from the younger generations who are pursuing a "more meaningful life." This paper does an ethnographic study on young Chinese urbanites' engagement in a village as an essential example of this trend. It argues that young people's choice for rural life is a reaction and a resistance to the social forces of consumerism and urbanization. By reflecting on the reimagination of modernity and life politics in the changing process, the research implies that accompanied by opportunities for social change, young people's promotion of rural lifestyles could be linked to the government's development agenda, and this might potentially cause new forms of inequalities in rural development. By drawing on practical experience, the paper brings narratives about young Chinese urbanites' life choices in rural places into the discussion of modernity and life politics, hopefully exemplifying a broader sociological contribution around the topic.

Introduction

In the contemporary world with urbanization, it has been the mainstream that people migrate to cities for more job opportunities and higher salaries. While cities are generally thought to present modernity, advance and superiority, rural areas are viewed as disadvantaged, backward and inferior comparatively. Modern cities create technological, economic, and social potential and diversity in all aspects (Noack and Federwisch 2020). Correspondently, people enjoy having relatively decent urban lifestyles. China has particularly witnessed a surge of migration from rural to urban areas since the 1990s. The proportion of the urban population in China had surged from approximately 25 percent in the 1990s to almost 60 percent by 2018 (United Nations 2018). The figure is estimated to approach 70 percent by 2025, and over one-third would consist of rural migrants (McKinsey Global Institution 2008).

However, while city lives indeed bring conveniences, an overemphasis on the speed of urbanization has caused problems (Jung 2016; Knox 2005; Zhu, Zhu, and Xiao 2019). Although there seems to exist more choices for food, clothing, jobs, and leisure activities, it does not

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spontaneously bring diverse opportunities for social exchanges (Liu, Wang, and MacKillopa 2020). People rarely know about their neighborhoods and are more likely to get alienated or atomized. In a rather material-oriented world, everyone has to work hard to meet the simplified standard of a "good life," which commonly means more money and higher social status. In this sense, although modern society gives people the right to do many things, it may fail to grant them the right "not" to do something (Pink 2008). Modernity and development are at many young people's cost of spiritual freedom and physical and mental well-being.

In modern China, rampant urbanization, with its unprecedented pace and scale, meanwhile puts forward materialism and consumerism in society. A great number of young urbanites are facing challenges of intense competition, overloaded work, and life pressures. In response, a countermovement emerges that some of them choose to migrate to remote rural places, where close interpersonal relations are entwined in traditions and where they are able to change their ways of living toward a more meaningful life. This "unusual" phenomenon brings new perspectives and updated experiences into rural studies. Trying to understand this alternative life choice in rural communities to the mainstream, the research conducts a case study of a typical village in Zhejiang, southeast China, focusing on the engagement of its new-come young urbanites. Given the normal movement of migrants from the rural to the urban in search of employment and adventure, it tries to explore why some urbanities are returning to the countryside. Drawing empirical data from a case study on what is happening in rural China, the research strives to place the discussions of this countermovement within a broader conceptual framework of modernity and lifestyle analysis and to exemplify a further sociological contribution.

The paper first reviews arguments from the rural sociology literature concerning newcomers to rural communities versus longtime residents. Second, it discusses core theoretical concepts, including modernity, lifestyles, and life politics, on the basis of which the analysis of young urbanites' reactions to rural living is unfolded. Third, it explains the employed research approaches and introduces the case study's research site. Next, the paper investigates the lifestyles of the migrated young urbanites in the village, explaining how, and why it is distinguished from the urban styles. It analyzes the differences and divisions between the new and local villagers, where contradictions and reasons are described. Under this context, the reimagination of modernity among the young generations is illustrated. Also, it highlights the potential issue of life politics in rural development and how different forms of power play a part in the process. Finally, the research concludes that while rural lifestyles promoted

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by young urbanites might be a way to resist the social forces of consumerism and urbanization, it additionally causes inequality in rural communities, especially when individualized rural lifestyles become fused with the political agenda of rural development.

Young Urban Newcomers Versus Longtime Rural Residents in Review

An overview of existing key literature in rural sociology helps to understand the phenomenon of young urbanites' movement to rural communities, especially those discussions about comparisons between village newcomers and old-timers, as well as urban/rural differences in a broader context.

In contrast to cities that represent the achievement of modernity, rural regions are often seen as disadvantaged and backward, given their supposedly limited resources, homogeneous employment choices and traditionally minded populations (Noack and Federwisch 2020). Rural people, on average, are considered to have lower incomes, less education and conservative attitudes than their urban counterparts (e.g., Albrecht 2022; Burton et al. 2013; Lichter and Brown 2011). Due to economic, demographic, and socio-cultural challenges, many villages are experiencing the flow of out-migration and brain drain (Sherman 2018), and young educated people are likely to move away from their rural hometowns to big cities for better opportunities. Beyond the comparisons between urban migrants and rural residents, it essentially implies a binary boundary regarding rural/urban differences and a common perception of the one-way routine from the rustic to the metropolitan for modern humans.

Nevertheless, when modernity exposes its problems of expanded urbanization and overloaded population, rural regions, and rural living, start showing their advantages and possibilities (Leyshon 2008). Apart from economic considerations, there remain uneconomic factors that motivate people to stay or return to rural communities, such as the strength of social ties, a strong sense of community and positive sentiments toward nature (e.g. Ulrich-Schad, Henly, and Safford 2013; Wolfe, Black, and Welser 2020). Albrecht (2022), for example, mentions that smaller population size and density allow rural community members to get acquainted more efficiently, which reflects "more primary relationships and fewer of the categorical and secondary relationships that dominate life in cities" (Albrecht 2022:5). With increasing amenity development of rural communities, young people start considering the countryside as productive spaces and rural landscapes as beautiful, peaceful, and healthy environments (Leyshon 2008). New migrants are attracted by the uniqueness of "rurality," and wealthy urbanites are buying

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second homes or moving full time into rural places (Sherman 2018). Concerning this new trend, Sherman (2018) suggests that the romanticized vision of rural lifestyles has arguably brought numerous social repercussions, including a social divide and a sense of marginalization for many residents.

In rural studies, a common approach to investigating interactions in rural communities is through comparisons between migrants and nonmigrants, usually referred to as "newcomers" and "old-timers," respectively (Qin 2016). Inconclusive research has been produced that some demonstrated migrants were often "younger, wealthier and more educated than long-standing residents and were more supportive of natural resource preservation and the control of local growth" (Qin 2016:102), while other later studies found less evidence about the difference (e.g., Qin 2015; Smith, Krannich, and Hunter 2001). Status-based resources are usually focused on those comparisons, such as human capital in education, job skills, and experience; cultural capital with all kinds of "soft-skills"; and social capital through connections with other community members (Sherman 2021). Different criteria have been discussed to differentiate between newer and longer-term residents, with significant highlighting to analyze relations and interactions between "newcomers" and "old-timers." Yet in terms of young urbanites migrating to rural communities, as what is happening in contemporary China, rare research has undertaken in-depth investigation on them, which makes this study with the potential to contrast similarities and differences between China and other nations essential and necessary.

Modernity, Lifestyle, and Life Politics

To a certain extent, the rising phenomenon of young urbanites' movement to rural spaces, implies a possibility to break down the binary rural/urban differences. The uncommon life choice indicates a reaction or even a resistance to the mainstream urbanization background, and it brings valuable insights into the reimagination of modernity through the lens of rural studies.

Giddens (1994) refers to the other side of modernity as "culture of risk," by which he means that "the future is continually drawn into the present by means of the reflexive organization of knowledge environments" (4). Completely unknown risks such as climate change, financial crisis, and global pandemics rise. People can no longer gain a sense of safety simply by earning more money or holding a steady job. They turn away from the overriding goal of economic growth but instead orient their lives toward more diverse values, interpersonal trust and innovative forms of connection and commitment (Giddens 1994). Some groups,

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for instance, leave traditional social systems to construct self-sufficient communities in areas like the countryside (Chen 2020). Humankind built modern metropolia in pursuit of independence and individuality of one's existence (Simmel 1903), but now they flee their cities in search of another degree of personal freedom.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that our world today is more uncertain than previous generations. According to Giddens (1994:2), the uncertainty of modernity is "manufactured" by "human involvement in trying to change the course of history or alter the contours of nature." To put it in another way, we live in a highly charged reflexive social environment that brings rewards and opportunities together with problems and anxieties. Under the circumstance of manufactured uncertainty, politics become not only about others but also personal (Giddens 1991). Daily issues at the micro-level, such as trust, morality, and self-identity, become vital to understanding complicated sorts of social conditions. Life choices are about decisions about how to act, who to be and how the relationship between individuals and society reshapes. These decisions are summarized as "lifestyles," which change and affect our societies in return (Giddens 1991).

Max Weber describes "lifestyles" as "modes of conduct, dress, speech, thought, and attitudes, that defined various 'honor' groups and that in turn served as models of behavior for those who aspired to be members of these groups" (Weber 1966, cited in Tumin 1970:179). By later extension, Tumin (1970) suggests that "lifestyles" also include "patterns such as family styles, value orientations to the world in general, and patterns of interpersonal and intergroup conduct" (179). In the post-traditional settings, lifestyles no longer exclusively apply to traditional cultures, but they imply a cluster of habits and orientations, and they concern the core making and the remaking of self-identity (Giddens 1991). As Giddens (1991:81) explained, "a lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity". More importantly, "in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so—we have no choice but to choose" (Giddens 1991:83).

Accordingly, Giddens (1991) highlights life politics as a politics of choices, lifestyles, and reflexively mobilized orders. At both the individual and collective levels, politics begins to concern human self-actualization and links the "self" to the system of global scope (Giddens 1991). Individuals who desire social or political change are "compelled to shape their own personal behaviors and choices toward the ideals they

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envision" (Portwood-Stacer 2013:2). Confronting all sorts of choices and decisions in daily lives, politics is represented in forms of "life-style bargaining" among which four types are mainly distinguished: (1) *active risk management* that generates the positive redistribution of recourse toward manufactured risk; (2) *economic life-style bargaining* that concerns the equal distribution of wealth; (3) *ecological life-style bargaining* that reflects the relationship with nature and aims to reduce ecologically harmful practices; and (4) *emotional life-style bargaining* that notes negotiation about emotional conditions of life and changing relations among individuals (Giddens 1994:9–10). In these ways, life politics allows positive-sum changes in human relations, and positive-sum emancipatory attempts are generated from individual to collective choices (Giddens 1994). Applying those theoretical implications to young urbanites' countermovement toward rural places with the important focuses on both self-reflexivity and institutional reflexivity, the research aims to provide further insights about: in what aspects those activities are self-reflective, how they interrelate to the country's rural development agenda and what lessons we can learn from.

Case Description and Research Approaches

China has witnessed fast development since the beginning of the 21st century, and it has now become the second-largest economy in the world. For the young generation growing up in a time when China is over-emphasizing the speed of economic growth, their life choices are largely modified during the country's development process. In February 2021, the central government announced that China had won a comprehensive battle against poverty. The key objectives for the next stage were to promote rural revitalization, accelerate agricultural and rural modernization, and realize national shared prosperity (The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2021). In response to the national policies, Zhejiang, an eastern coastal province called "the backbone of China" as it is a major driving force in the country's economy, has made several pioneer attempts in rural construction.

Based on the literature review and theoretical implications, this empirical research analyzes the phenomenon of young Chinse urbanites' returning to rural communities. It focuses on the case of Qingshan Village in Hangzhou,[1] Zhejiang, where young people have spontaneously gathered since 2015. This village is a pioneer model of rural development and the first "Future Village" in the province that imagines an

[1]Hangzhou is the capital and most populous city of Zhejiang Province.

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eco-friendly and digitalized rural lifestyle.[2] The Nature Conservancy first came to Qingshan Village in 2015 and developed the water fund for water protection. This brought the first group of young urbanites living there. After the water quality was restored, Qingshan, led by the coming young people, started its journey to explore the development of local industries in the realms of traditional handicrafts, environmental education, and eco-tourism. Social innovative approaches are additionally initiated to enrich the local culture and protect the environment. So far, there have been 70 young people spontaneously settling in Qingshan, becoming the group of "new villagers." Correspondingly, people who have lived there aboriginally are referred to as the group of "local villagers."

The research began in June 2021, and twelve-month ethnographic research was conducted in Qingshan Village. Qualitative research approaches are employed, including participant observations and interviews. From the specific case, the study tries to interpret the young generation's reaction to lifestyle bargaining and life politics and to exemplify the latest bottom-up form of social transformation in contemporary China. During the twelve-month ethnography, my relationship with the village community has been based on mutual understanding involving ongoing conversations at all stages of the research project. I lived in a farmhouse, and I became a member of the "new villager" group. I engaged in various village activities, participated in all sorts of village meetings, and even initiated a local newspaper discussing popular topics and sharing ideas with all community members. In this way, I got a chance for direct observations about what is happening in the village and, more importantly, direct involvement as an "insider" (Yin 2018).

Since I speak the same dialect as village residents, it allows me to fit well in the research site, lets people know me, and provides me with detailed data. To better comprehend how people think and to further interact with them, I additionally undertake several formal and informal interviews with all relevant stakeholder groups, including new-migrated urbanites, old-time residents, returning young people who were born in the village, as well as village cadres and the local government's officials. More specific descriptions, interpretations, and narratives are unfolded in the following sections.

[2]It should be noted that as Zhejiang's economic development level is at the forefront of China, overall speaking, villages in Zhejiang, including Qingshan, are not poor regarding their economic indicators, compared with those in western China, though not as rich as the urban counterparts.

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The Development of a Future Village

Due to the increased cost of living, concentrated population and intensive competition in big cities, more and more young people migrate to other places in search of other life possibilities. Qingshan Village happens to be such a destination that has attracted a certain number of young residents. Before 2015, Qingshan was an unknown village located at the edge of Hangzhou, a one-hour drive from the urban downtown. According to the official statistics, it used to have a registered population of approximately 3,000, but the actual residents are no more than 1,500, most of which are older people, as the rest have moved to cities primarily as migrant workers.

As a result of pesticides and fertilizers used in the nearby bamboo forests in Qingshan, the reservoir's water quality was detected to be substandard from the 2000s to the 2010s. This has caused a concrete threat to the health of local villagers who rely on this water source. In 2015, the Nature Conservancy (TNC) came to Qingshan and brought the first new villager, HJ, who worked to improve the reservoir's water quality. In the following year, a water fund was developed, involving a two-million yuan[3] investment in the conservation project. It introduced the model of "trust," a fiduciary relationship in which one party gives another party the right to hold title to property or assets for the benefit of a third party, the beneficiary. Through the water fund, TNC bought local farmers' management rights of bamboo forests around the reservoir. The management of the watershed was centralized in this way, and agricultural pollution from forest activities was gradually eliminated. After three-year efforts, the water quality of this reservoir has met the top national standard.

During the process of watershed protection, Qingshan Village attracted an increasing number of young people who, at that stage, were doing volunteering work with TNC. They settled down in Qingshan temporarily and began to consider how to involve further local participation in environmental protection, but also the revitalization of the village overall. With the support of TNC in 2017, they rebuilt a deserted local primary school and made it into a nature hub. They utilized the physical space as a center for innovative industries such as environmental education and eco-tourism. As explained by the director of the Naturehub (XX, female, 35 years old):

> Social donation is not a long-term solution, and the biggest challenge was how to generate value with the village's existing resources. To start with, we provided services for group building

[3]"Yuan" is the basic monetary unit of the People's Republic of China.

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> and public welfare activities in the village. Then, we arranged for local agricultural products to be sold to outside clients. Through our sincere actions, we started to gain a good reputation in the community for what we are doing and what we offer.

In the same year, an influential design company moved its science studio and art library to Qingshan Village, researching traditional Chinese crafts and encouraging more sustainable lifestyles. In sequence, an outdoor sports base, a café, and pub, two handcraft studios, several guesthouses, and activity centers came in. All the migrated young urbanites consist of the group of "new villagers," and their initiatives in different areas are promoted as the new style of the rural community. As one of them suggested, "the future of the village means change and sustainability" (HJ, male, 34 years old, nature conservator).

In 2020, a collective commercial company was set up in Qingshan with the support of new villagers and village cadres. 12.24 million RMB investment capital was involved in running local farmhouses and developing rural tourism collectively. In return, the company donates 10 percent of the income back to water protection so as to achieve economic sustainability. Seeing the increasing prosperity of Qingshan driven by young people, Zhejiang Province later officially proposed the idea of the "Future Village/Community," pioneeringly exploring methods of rural development and imagining an eco-friendly and digitalized rural lifestyle (Wu and Liu 2021). Qingshan Village became a pilot project under the policy, and it started getting more and more attention from the general public.

By 2021, approximately 70 young urbanites have settled in Qingshan, aged from 25 to 45 years old. Most of the new villagers are non-permanent residents, and they usually rent rooms at local farmhouses during their stay for one year on average. About fifteen of them, who have lived in Qinghsan for more than five years, have also signed lease contracts with local villagers for a longer commitment, which commonly means 10-year or 15-year tenantry. From observations and interviews, the purpose of the young urbanites' settlement in the village is not only to realize their personal fulfilments or look for a sense of belonging but an altruistic aim of rural development with the practice of meaningful things related to environment conservation, natural education, cultural inheritance, and so on. They try to rebuild "communities" in relocating with members who share similar values, thoughts, beliefs, and lifestyles. This has become a unique "name card" of Qingshan. When outside visitors come to this Future

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Village, they often get surprised there are so many young residents, which is not a common situation in rural China. Learning from how migrated urbanites live and interact, visitors describe that they feel "a psychological sense of community" in Qingshan.

Rural Lifestyles as Alternatives

Before moving to Qingshan, most new villagers lived in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou. They worked in corporations like Alibaba and Deloitte with good salaries. But meanwhile, they had to pay high living expenses in house rent, transportation, food, social activities, clothes, and accessories. In the word of a new villager, "that was a very consumerism life in a very consumerism world" (SF, female, 42 years old, freelancer). Everyday consumption does not equally bring an enriched spiritual life. Urbanites express that they found it hard to get a sense of "belonging" in cities, as they could not find interpersonal warmness when living there. There are few opportunities to know new people or interact with people other than colleagues and friends. As an interviewee told, "I have no idea who lives next door to my rental apartment. At the company, your colleagues are your colleagues, you would never become friends. Once after work, you just want to get away from them and go back home alone" (YQ, female, 26 years old, educator).

The negative side of the metropolitan makes young people isolated, and they start to question the meaning of life. To get rid of the intense pressure, some people migrate to villages. Although there is no precise statistic about the number, we can learn from the media and through experience that it has become an increasingly rising phenomenon. Some urbanites migrate to remote areas like Dali and Tibet, which are depicted as an otherworldly sort of place; others, like those in this case research, take small steps back from cities, moving to the countryside not far away from cities. Media often use the buzzword "tangping (躺平, 'lying down' in English)" to describe these young people's choices, describing those who adopt more leisure and less materialistic lives in rejection of professional demands and societal expectations. Correspondently, Qingshan Village is called "Utopia," referring to a place of impractically ideal perfection.

However, from the ethnography, this research argues that it could be a positive path to a future of self-development and self-reflectivity. The choice of rural urbanities is neither an escape nor an idealization but a radical practice of new lifestyles and life values. As Portwood-Stacer (2013) argues, lifestyle choices off the mainstream are particularly noticeable because they might represent an active effort to make changes away from the status quo. This is reflected in the young

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urbanites' movement to rural areas. Their life choices bring possibilities to change the competitive social environment, overturn the single-valued social system in modernity, and meanwhile bring chances for rural community development. Politics is personal (Giddens 1991); thus, these attempts indicate the most prevailing reflections of post-modernity and might even be extended to radical visions for how society should change (Portwood-Stacer 2013).

In Qingshan's case, young urbanites with resources, experience, and privilege consider migrating to a rural area as an alternative to modern living. At first glance, they do escape from the polluted and overloaded city lives, which is out of individual concerns. But beyond that, they are looking for different ways of thinking from an individual and a collective perspective. They want to use their resources, experience, and privilege, in turn, to explore innovative solutions to rural development and find out how people can live a more meaningful life in the changing process. Specifically, the most common goals mentioned by new villagers about their proposed rural lifestyles are (1) to rebuild a relationship between nature and human beings, and (2) to rebuild connections among the community members. These highly echo Giddens' illustration of "ecological life-style bargaining" and "emotional life-style bargaining" for positive-sum emancipatory attempts in modernity.

To get more connections with nature, new villagers make efforts to promote eco-friendly lifestyles. They encourage the full use of existing products and to create designs out of them; they organize second-hand markets and exchange things to reduce waste. This is similar to some Western movements, like "voluntary simplicity" that promotes sustainable lifestyles and encourages more ethical and environmental in the overconsumption world (Demirel 2020). Apart from the very recognizable facades that are related to patterns of consumption and material aspects, Chaney (1996) notices that lifestyle additionally "offers the symbolic means to express a narration of self" (114). Applying it to Qingshan, young urbanites' turning also represents a shift from pursuing a surficial lifestyle to exploring the self. As told by a new villager, after moving to Qingshan, she had fallen in love with the feeling of connecting to nature: "that brings me an inner peace, and I feel less anxious towards life" (NE, female, 37 years old, designer). By reconsidering the relationship between the "self" and nature, as some other urban returnees expressed, they have realized there exist multiple life choices, and simply getting close to grand nature offers a pleasure that money can never buy.

Moreover, many of them start reflecting on environmental issues like the climate crisis and the role an individual "self" can play in making a

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difference at a collective level. For instance, they introduce composting techniques in farming and call for protecting local plants, birds, insects, and animals. Habeck (2019) argues that "sensibilities" is another critical dimension of lifestyles, meaning "a metaphor for collective concerns, moral judgements, 'big issues', and perhaps one might also add the term social imaginaries" (15). In this aspect, as implied by the following quotation, young urbanites' pursuit of rural lifestyles involves individualized engagement in daily life, together with essential care about collectivist interest.

> Most people who live in cities rarely consider why their daily behaviors matter to the world. They think environmental change is such a big thing, and there is little an individual can do. They buy a lot of things that they do not really need just because everyone around them are doing so. They cannot imagine water shortage because they never get a chance to see reservoirs, farmlands, woods and animals in villages as we do. (XX, female, 35 years old, NatureHub director)

As Sherman (2018) has observed and researched in Paradise Valley in the United States, young urbanites moved to the countryside for its rural advantages and natural amenity. "It is a choice made at the individual level for often very personal reasons and seldom with thought regarding the social impacts of this type of movement of people and resources across space and place" (Sherman 2018:2). Comparatively, the case of Qingshan has its peculiarity. As previously explained, the young group first came for watershed protection. This kind of environmental-conservation spirit has been running through their later practices in Qingshan. After the water quality has been improved by eliminating chemical fertilizer and pesticide use in the centralized forests, they have been thinking of the importance of increasing all villagers' environment awareness. By helping old-time residents to run farmhouses and restaurants with the insistence of green development concepts, they build up an informal association, within which all joined households agree not to use disposable products, to save water and sort waste in their daily operations.

During the process, new villagers get opportunities to interact with old-time residents, leading to their second goal of the rural-lifestyle proposal to reconstruct the relationship among people and rebuild the sense of community. As explained by several urban returnees, interpersonal circles are limited in cities. "The social distance seems to grant people a kind of freedom that no one would care what they do, but meanwhile, people are losing something more important,

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like trust and understanding" (HY, male, 39, nature education practitioner). This is similar to how Simmel argues, "with the rapid pace and all the people we come across, we would not be able to handle it if we had to deeply engage with everyone and everything, so we become detached" (Simmel 1903, cited in Kozaryn and Mazelis 2018:351). The metropolitan person responds primarily in a rational manner, which is least sensitive and emotional and "furthest re-moved from the depths of the personality" (Simmel 1903:12). As human activities are essentially social, impersonal interactions with those we encounter are necessitated, whereas the features of urban lives, unfortunately, are causing a big loss of "self" (Kozaryn and Mazelis 2018).

Rural lifestyles tell a different story from that. Wirth (1939) identifies the uniqueness of rurality from its reduced size and density. It allows community members opportunities "to become acquainted with a higher proportion of community residents, reduces the total number of social contacts, and allow community residents get to know one another on a more personal level" (Albrecht 2022:5). That is in consistence with what has been observed and experienced in Qingshan. Within the limited spatial environment, village members get chances to know each other and get familiar with each other. This sense of community gives migrated residents great enthusiasm to organize further community activities, such as talks, workshops, concerts, parties, and festival celebrations. The events are not exclusive, as new villagers invite old-time residents and vice versa. A closely tied rural community comes into being, within which all members can share thoughts and get mutual help. Through interactions with "the others," young urbanites find places of "the self." As the following quotation indicates, this brings them great hope in life, and it turns out to be an essential aspect of their reflection on modernity:

> Here we enjoy our lives. We do not live for work or work for life. This is totally different from cities. There are many interesting people here, and we do meaningful things together. Everyone is able to find their own values in their own ways. (XZ, male, 40 years old, administrator)

When Migrated Urbanites Meet Local Villagers

Young people's movement from the city to the countryside can be seen as a political engagement that forces us to understand "how individualization processes shape the construction of issues in an everyday sense" (Vromen, Loader, and Xenos 2015:533). By choosing the places to work and live, they signify who they are and who they want to be

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(Portwood-Stacer 2013). While traditional urban lifestyles are mostly attached to the orientation toward consumption (Pouta, Sieva, and Neuvonen 2006), innovative rural lifestyles suggest that young people rely more on self-sufficiency, self-reflection, and self-actualization. By returning to rural areas, the young generations are showing their resistance to consumerism, materialism, and urbanization. Individuals with these shared sensibilities are grouped, based on which a Future Village is built.

However, from the other side of the story, it is also important to understand whether old-time residents share the same views on this "future," which highlights the critical discussions in rural studies about new-come urban migrants versus longtime rural residents. As described, new villagers in Qingshan are mostly well-educated young people who used to live and work in big cities. Comparatively, many local villagers are old people over their 60s, with little formal education. They have developed their traditions in all aspects with their links to the past. The most traditional local industry is running bamboo plantations, and the most common local activities include playing Mahjong, chess, or card games. After young urbanites came up with innovative development models for social enterprises, creative industries, and nature conservation, they meanwhile brought contradictions. Some old-timers show their misunderstanding and untrusty toward outsiders. An invisible but distinguished line starts to emerge between the two groups.

For instance, the water fee is quite cheap in China and even free in rural areas. Holding this assumption of water-using, local villagers found it hard to accept paying for water protection. When young urbanites initiated the social enterprise model to extract 10 percent of income from village tourism for watershed conservation, some old-time villagers suspected the private profiteering of the money. Likewise, new villagers called for bird protection in Qingshan. Old villagers used to apply catching nets because they wanted to keep birds away from their crops and plants, from which they made a living. Whereas new villagers suggested them to give up traditional approaches to farming as they might hurt wild animals and, alternatively, to use art installations like windmills and scarecrows for testing. They never thought of this, and some of them expressed their confusion. Moreover, without efficient communication, an ecological conservation redline was proposed in 2020, within which no farming should be allowed, nor reclaiming or any business-related activities. These made some old villagers angry, as they believed the measurement was a deprivation of their traditional means of livelihood.

Another example is young urbanites' promotion of a healthier lifestyle. Wanting to get closer to nature, new villagers do a lot of outdoor

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activities in Qingshan, such as swimming, boating, cycling, climbing, and hiking. In particular, they got excited to find a water area as a good place to swim.[4] "We are only allowed to swim in swimming pools in cities. So, that is such a treasure for the village life" (FY, male, 43 years old, sports entrepreneur). Nevertheless, local villagers were quite concerned about safety issues—if accidents happen when people swim there, it would be mentally harmful to the village residents, especially those who live around.[5] Additionally, old villagers were very unsatisfied with noises, crowded cars, and garbage brought by the increasing number of outside visitors. They were anxious about the uncertainty of the covid prevention in the circumstance. They constantly reported their complaints to the village cadres or had terrible quarrels directly with new villagers about those issues.

Whether nature protection, healthy life promotion, or tourism development, the rural lifestyles proposed by young urbanites are, as a matter of fact, far removed from the traditional lives of many residents. For old villagers, it could be hard for them to accept new ideas and fast changes in a short space of time. Different ways of thinking and living, as well as the differentiation in terms of age, education, and family background, have caused a gap between newcomers and old-timers, which still represents the essential rural/urban dichotomy. Those who run farmhouses or restaurants express great praise for newcomers as the new industries have attracted more visitors and, thus, increased their incomes. Apart from that, most old villagers say they interact little with young urbanites, rarely knowing what they are doing and why. They are not discouraging the young people but showing ignorance and indifference. Their shared attitude is that "as long as you do not disturb my life, I do not care about what you do"; "we do nothing with each other and live our own lives independently". As a result, they form another uniform group insisting on their own living spaces, and the two cliques live parallelly without many interactions.

Interplays between newcomers and old-timers reveal the most prevailing challenges in community development. Meade et al. (2016:2) describe community development as "a process through which 'ordinary' people collectively attempt to influence their life circumstances." An essential purpose of that is to achieve collaboration and participation among community members, and on the basis of that, social justice, equality, and other common goals could be achieved (Gilchrist

[4]This is a different place from the watershed as a protected area mentioned previously.

[5]In Chinese tradition, people see unnatural causes (such as unnatural death, accidents, etc.) as unlucky.

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and Taylor 2016). For outsiders entering a community for development, they must understand local cultures and situations well, have good skills in building up mutual–trust relationships with community members and bring people together for common goals (Gilchrist and Taylor 2016).

In the case of Qingshan, frankly speaking, new villagers do not intentionally eliminate traditional ways of living, even though they do not fully agree with some parts of the tradition. "Respect" and "understanding" are the most common principles they mentioned in interviews, which are the crucial moral orders missing in contemporary cities (Smelser and Alexander 1999, cited in Kozaryn and Mazelis 2018), and it is also the key why young urbanites move to the village. In practice, they have not stopped trying to integrate their values with the local situations. They show enthusiasm in response to the contradictions to involve as many local villagers as possible in discussing their ideal form of rural lifestyles. They organize activities to learn from local rituals and farming experiences. They record memories of local cultures and document local history. They even initiate monthly democratic consultation meetings, negotiating issues that concern community members and coming up with effective solutions with the support of the local government.

Nevertheless, it turns out that they still form a homogeneous group with the same attitude and belief about what the Future Village should be like without many substantial exchanges with the old villagers. It is usual for different groups of people to have distinct ways of thinking, but the differentiated values are maximized, particularly in the context of rural development, without valid communications, and in-depth discussions. Moreover, new villagers are favored by the local government and spotlighted by the general public, which has made them truly privileged in the changing process. While rural lifestyles are seen as a promising alternative for urbanization and rural development, critical research, including the underlying reasons behind it, ignores who gets benefits and whose voices are overlooked, becomes crucial. Reflections and attention on ideology and power in different groups' interactions are necessary. The failure to recognize the diversity and the uneven distribution of power might lead to exclusion and powerlessness for some (Charnley, Roddam, and Wistow 2009), which leads to the discussions in the following section.

Reimagining Modernity in Differentiation

Similar communities or groups based on shared values and lifestyles have also emerged in cities among young people (e.g., Chen 2020; Kong and Wang 2020), but the relocation to rural areas is obviously a more

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radical attempt. The physical conditions, inconvenient public transportation and poor delivery services create a natural barrier to urban-style consumerism. In the representation of certain young Chinese urbanites, new villagers in Qingshan gain greater control over their lives. They examine the flexibility of their lives and careers as more significant than high salaries and strict work orientation. They are making personal decisions based on life fulfillment. From their point of view, rural areas are no longer associated with backwardness but with good health, less stress and better life quality. They start to retreat the rural living and reconceptualize a "good life," which is a positive strive of "life-style bargaining" (Giddens 1994).

Also, being the more affluent group in the village, young urbanites share higher responsibilities in public affairs such as environmental conservation and community development. Their actions contain their pursuits for human rights, human well-being, and human development as well as political participation in anti-modernity. In this way, the young Chinese generations demonstrate how they are reimagining modernity, including a reflection on the relationship with nature and with people, and how they modify their lives toward an increasing value on social engagement and a more human-oriented society. As told by an interviewee:

> It makes me think about the meaning of life and work. When I am doing things I'm interested in, I don't see it as work but as a part of my life. I feel what I am doing is meaningful. This makes me ignore all the inconvenient sides of village life. I concentrated more on the people and the environment around me. (HY, male, 39, nature education practitioner)

However, we should be careful not to assume the homogeneity of young people neither in this community nor in this country. While excitedly talking about urbanites' choice of rural lifestyles as alternatives, there remain enough reasons to be concern what kinds of privileges they already have and what sorts of problems they might spontaneously cause. As described, over eighty percent of new villagers in Qingshan hold university degrees, and one-third have overseas working or studying experiences, which implies their relatively wealthier and higher-class family backgrounds. They are granted to undertake less family burden and financial pressure as long as they can maintain their basic needs. Even though not all parents understand or support their choices, these young urbanites hold essential freedom to live their own lives. One of them says, "my parents have given up completely. No marriage, no children,

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rural life—they think I might be abnormal. But they live far away from where I am, they are unable to interfere, as we don't depend on each other" (XX, female, 35 years old, NatureHub director). Later she admits this freedom itself contains a privilege—if she came from a poor family, if she did not have the opportunity to a good education, if she were unable to travel all over the world, she would not be able to choose a life like this, and her view toward life would be completely different.

From local villagers' perspectives, they admire young urbanites' life choices but they are not allowed to follow in the same way, despite the fast development of Qingshan as a pioneering Future Village. According to a local interviewee (male, 43 years old, government security), "these people are rich people and they are just here to 'experience a different life'." Another young local villager expresses, "we migrant to big cities for jobs, because there were no opportunities here in Qingshan. If allowed, who don't want to stay in their hometown?" (JF, male, 32 years old, sales). Since 2017, seeing the prosperity of their hometown, a certain number of young local villagers did have returned. I happen to know two of them who joined the NatureHub as long-term staff members. One of them resigned in 2021 after his three-year stay and changed his job to an administrator at the local government. He explained (male, 27 years old) that "my parents force me to do that. The salary is the key factor they consider." Unable to see the hope of working in the village, his parents assume working for the government system is a more stable choice in the long run. The other returnee agrees upon this. After a one-year contract, he also decided to leave. He expressed a sense of helplessness: "The good thing is we have very flexible working time, and I did learn a lot by working with those thoughtful urbanites. But you see, I cannot sustain my life with this job. I have to do extra ones. This is far from enough" (male, 26 years old).

As critics argue, "lifestyle tactics are only available to the very privileged who are able to freely make 'choices' about how to live their lives," and the privileged are "the greatest beneficiaries of the policies and ideologies" (Braunstein and Doyle 2002; Littler 2009, cited in Portwood-Stacer 2013:8). It reminds us that while focusing on the noticeable alternative life choices, voices from many local villagers, especially those who are at the same age as newcomers, are yet largely missing. In addition to understanding why some young urbanites return to rural areas, we should pay additional attention to why some are unable to. The primary factor is related to MONEY, as evidence has shown in the above examples. Compared with the urbanites, young residents possess much less financial capital and social capital (Yan 2008). As implied by an interviewee, "I envy that they can enjoy the village life. They don't need

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to worry about earning money, carrying families and all sorts of realistic issues. If I can, I would like to do so as well. But unfortunately, I can't, at least now yet, even though I grew up here" (XY, female, 30 years old, sales).

Alongside the increasing appeal of the countryside to urbanites, the backwardness of rural areas remains a fact and a common perception for local villagers, which is well represented in how the two groups view MONEY. For the young urbanites, pursuing an inner self, rather than more wealth, stands at the core of a rural lifestyle. This pursuit can be realized in various approaches, such as reducing the cost-of-living expenses, getting flexible jobs, or taking environment-friendly actions. The crucial cognition of how meaningful life could be makes them not have to stay in the big cities. Whereas for most local villagers, getting richer and gaining higher social status are their main life goals, only after which they believe they could get more freedom. To an extent, they are yet immersed ideologically in this country's emphasis on fast development and modernity, as they have not been the direct beneficiaries of that. As noticed by Yan (2008:8), "the prolonged rural-urban dual structure in Chinese socialism" has led to this kind of individualization situation in villages. Since many rural young people remain outside of the state-sponsored social welfare systems, they have no choice but to rely on themselves for survival and well-being (Yan 2008).

From the radical changes happening in Qingshan, we can see different types of thinking between the urban and rural young adults, from which we foresee a significant contradiction regarding their reimagination of modernity. While young urbanites are seeking alternative choices in response to manufactured risks in modernity, rural residents remain trapped in the manufactured risks and their sense of safety is still from material foundations and hard work. Similar to what is happening in rural areas in the United States, unequally distributed financial capital, social capital, and cultural capital have contributed to the differentiation, which holds the danger of further dividing community members (Sherman 2021). The historical rural/urban dichotomy remains an important function of differences in types of lifestyles, visions, and values and rural isolation (Albrecht 2022).

Reflecting Power in Life Politics

This section continues the discussion about power dynamics under the surface of life politics, looking at the following questions in further depth: How is the contradiction reacted in practice? How do forms of power shape and are shaped by the village development process? How

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is the uniqueness of rurality with differing interaction patterns being utilized and modified in modernity? Whose development is it essentially?

As illustrated, urban returnees' social innovations involve nature conservation, cultural heritage, creative education, outdoor exercise, and handcrafting retailer. This beginning contains a bottom-up narrative of how young people gathered in Qingshan spontaneously. Afterward, the innovations caught the local government's attention and, thus, have been closely integrated into the top-down development channel. After Qingshan was chosen as a pilot project in Zhejiang Province's construction of the "Future Village/Community," it brought not only opportunities but also pressure to the local government that urgently wanted to achieve the goal of making a difference. Government officials took advantage of urban returnees' novel concepts and utilized them as a vital approach to form a new village culture politically.

Adding to the local government's role, power dynamics in Qingshan have become more complex. Since new villagers bring thoughts, ideas, and possibilities for the village's economic growth, their demands and needs are much valued with substantial support from the government. Policies about reward projects, such as the setting of enterprise funds and credits for the talented, mostly target the new villagers. According to the calculation of proposals submitted in the grassroots-level negotiation meetings, over eighty percent of issues are put forward by new villagers. In comparison, local villagers' needs and demands seem less considered, and their visions of a "good village" are rarely heard. The town mayor argues that "their (old villagers') qualities are relatively low. Many of them are short-sighted. They probably won't understand new things and new values in a short time. We have to implement some policies in our ways." Unfortunately, as the largest group in Qingshan, the old-timers have been seen as an "obstacle" in the village's development agenda.

This demonstrates another significant problem of rural/urban difference and community development in a broader sense. Longtime villagers, who are supposed to be the landowner, now become the helped and the received in development rather than the main actors. While helpers, which refers to young urbanites in this case, are sensed as generous and noble, the helped are labeled as needy, inferior, and deficient (Kapoor, 2008, cited in Lough and Carter-Black 2015). It becomes ironic that given the urban returnees are taking anti-modernity actions by trying alternatives in rural areas, in essence, the opposed relationship between the rural and the urban has not been changed. Local villagers remain depicted as the less-educated disadvantaged aging group, and their positions keep being as "a marginalized other who are socially and culturally separated from the urban" (Leyshon 2008:1). The development of

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Future Villages is still following that of cities, assuming the urbanites' knowledge and experience are more advanced while overlooking desires and wants of the old-timers. Having felt that the "Future Village" vision is not based on them, many old villagers mention that they no longer want to be involved in public issues. "We know nothing, we can say nothing" (female, 60s, retired). This makes them even more isolated both politically and socially.

Nevertheless, we must understand it is impossible to talk about the "future" of a village without the "past." In a negative aspect, the partiality in social policies and governance strategies has caused not only inequality but serious dangers to broaden the gap between the new and old villagers. In the chatgroup of Qingshan, there have been an increasing number of quarrels. Old-time residents, especially those who have not benefitted from the development of "Future Village," often accuse migrated urbanites when problems arise, and anger is even sparked when the village cadres try to speak for new villagers.

Giddens (1991:210) highlights life politics as emancipatory politics with "a generic outlook concerned above all with liberating individuals and groups from constraints which adversely affect their life chances." Its primary and essential goals of justice, equality and participation closely relate to crucial community development approaches that value interactions, participation and coordination (Popple 2015). At the level of urban–rural comparison, it might be positive that the young generations are creating their own power by choosing alternatives. But at the practically grassroots level, to ensure justice and equality in the changing process, we should always be careful not to idealize the future of villages in favor of the urban newcomers. Special notice and care should be given to the marginalized and the unheard with a more considerable attitude. To ensure genuine participation and substantial emancipatory for all, not only anti-modernity approaches but also community work approaches, such as asset-based empowerment, should be appropriately developed to build local capabilities as a whole gradually. That would be the actual future of villages that we should aim at.

Additionally, it might not be fair to accuse young urbanites entirely. A new villager said, "I started to notice the increase of division, contradiction and opposition in Qingshan, and I feel very disappointed." Young urbanites' migration story began with the nature conservation project. Beyond a resistance toward the social forces of modernity and urbanization, as well as a desire for power in their own lives, which indeed shows their privileges and romanticism, the young group also hold very altruistic goals to innovate lifestyles and develop the village. During their stay, the unique rurality and the important sense of community

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have significantly brought them commitment and new reflections on their personal movements (Wolfe et al. 2020). Many of them participate actively in public affairs and resolving village issues. They help the poor to sell agricultural products, guide visitors to consume in local restaurants and farmhouses, generate communication opportunities to share stories within the community, and introduce innovative business models to maintain sustainability.

Their advocates for lifestyles and values are embedded in their actions, which are supposed to be positive-sum conceptions to realize both individual pursuits and collective interests (Habeck 2019). Yet when passively and politically conflated with the systemic subversion of the local governance, they are no longer simply about individual choices or even group ideals. Young urbanites' bottom-up explorations are turning into a long-term top-down goal for the village development agenda as well as an awaited future example for all other villages in this country. At this stage, the future of a village is neither decided by newcomers nor old-timers.

Conclusion

As politics becomes personal in modernity and post-modernity settings, young urbanites' moving to rural areas creates alternative sensory contexts to those framed by traditional routines of individual life choices. The emerging pattern opposes to "modernity" as it has been imagined in most urbanities' minds. Through lifestyle bargaining, they seek the chance to reduce social inequality, division, and even social fragmentation (Giddens 1994). To a certain extent, it also depicts the latest picture of social transformation in contemporary China from a very bottom-up view. Under the background of the country's fast development in construction and economy, young urbanites' reaction from the urban to the rural is a spontaneous action. It is an escape, but also a resistance, expressing their dissatisfaction with the single-standard value in the society that only gives them overloaded pressure rather than a sense of belonging. Alternatively, rural places provide them with the freedom to live differently, caring about the self, nature, and others.

In the Future Village chosen as the case study in this research, plural values and experiences among young urbanites, old villagers, village returnees, and the local government exist together relationally and interdependently (Pink 2008). Compared to the United States, where urban-to-rural migration is strongly related to amenities and personal reasons (e.g., Brehm, Eisenhauer, and Krannich 2009; Sherman 2018), Chinese young people's countermovement is combined with more altruistic factors. From that, we see opportunities for alternative lifestyles, self-actualization, community empowerment and

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rural development, but also potential negatives of unequally distributed power and attention, especially when the movement is brought into the government-level programs with an aim to booster rural development. In essence, there are significant similarities between China and the United States in the changing process of their villages. While newcomers emphasize the uniqueness of "rurality," old-timers are facing significant social isolation with little support available. Institutionally structured reasons should be responsible for the imbalance, including the partiality in national policies that remain driven by traditional development indicators and the stereotyped cognition of the rural/urban dichotomy.

All the lessons importantly remind us of the dynamics in life politics and the significance of constant reflections in practice. As a study on the phenomenon at its early stage, it has to be admitted the data collected in one case might not be enough to answer and explain all the important research questions. Hopefully, future research will keep exploring modernity, lifestyle choices, and life politics under the context of rural development, investigating conflicts among different groups in depth and analyzing interplays between lifestyle ideologies and rural policies. Presumably, comparisons could be further made across cases in different places, areas, and countries so as to reach more general conclusions and more meaningful implications.

Ethical Rules

This research has gained the ethical approval from School of Social and Public Administration, East China University of Science and Technology.

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