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Xu Yong

Central China Normal University

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On the Rural Revitalization in the Middle and Late Stages of Modernization

Xu Yong*

Central China Normal University

Abstract: China's rural revitalization, which was initiated in the middle and late stages of modernization, features distinct characteristics of the times. It is necessary to approach rural revitalization in China from the aspects of industrial-agricultural coordination, urban-rural integration, and regional balance. Industrial-agricultural coordination concerns forging the "world's factory" and, more importantly, developing into the "world's farm" through rural revitalization. Urban-rural integration is not just about urban modernization, but also about rural modernization through rural revitalization. Regional balance requires the promotion of characteristic development in peripheral regions with targeted measures of rural revitalization, as well as the building of highly developed city clusters.

Keywords: the middle and late stages of modernization, rural revitalization, industrial-agricultural coordination, urban-rural integration, regional balance

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Rural revitalization has been introduced in the context of modernization. Industrialization, urbanization, and agricultural modernization are three essentials for, and by-products of, the transformation of a traditional society to a modern one. It is precisely in the process of modernization that the three dominant factors in pre-modern society, i.e., traditional agriculture, rural areas and farmers, are

* Xu Yong, Center for Chinese Rural Studies, Central China Normal University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Xu Yong, Institute for China Rural Studies, Central China Normal University, Wuhan. E-mail: xuyong8925@163.com

on the wane giving rise to the so-called “three rural issues” (issues relating to agriculture, rural areas and farmers). Yet, modernization can be divided into several stages. China is currently in the middle and late stages of modernization. Such a historical period, with unique attributes, creates new requirements and conditions, which are different from those in previous periods of rural development. China should grasp the staged characteristics of modernization and advance its modernization through industrial-rural coordination, urban-rural integration and regional balance. Only by doing so can China profoundly understand and pinpoint the status and trends of rural revitalization.

Industrial-agricultural Coordination and Rural Revitalization

Each form of society has a corresponding production basis. Karl Marx argued, “The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist” (Marx, 1995, p. 142). In terms of industrial form, traditional society is primarily based on agriculture, while modern society mainly relies on industry. An industrial society, much less fettered by nature, can create more productive forces than an agricultural society. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Marx said, “The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together” (Marx, 1995, p. 277). For this reason, in a sense, industrialization can be seen as a synonym for modernization. The strongest economies of the world today are also known as industrialized countries.

As industry rises, agriculture declines. Nonetheless, agriculture as a sector remains indispensable to human society and even plays a strategic role in the survival and development of mankind. During the process of modernization, how to ensure the coordinated development of industry and agriculture has become a major challenge. Modernization, being a long historical process, can be divided into different stages, each of which features distinct forms of industrial and agricultural development.

Industrial development is related to a specific historical context. Take the United States as an example. This young country is free from historical fetters. According to Barrington Moore Jr., an American scholar studying modernization, “The United States did not face the problem of dismounting a complex and well-established agrarian society of either the feudal or bureaucratic forms” (Moore, 1987, p. 88). “...Nor has American society ever had a massive class of peasants comparable to those in Europe and Asia” (Moore, 1987, p. 88). In the process of modernization, the United States has managed to strike a balance between industrial and agricultural development. So far, the United States remains among the world’s strongest industrialized countries, the most competitive agricultural countries, as well as the “world’s farm”.

Unlike a few countries of immigrants such as the United States, countries with a

long history are without exception faced with the same challenge, namely, how to ensure coordinated development of industry and agriculture during the process of modernization, although their specific conditions, timings and approaches to this challenge may vary. The UK was the first country to complete modernization through machine. Modernization and rural development in the United Kingdom can be summarized by the following three points. First, prior to the emergence of modern society, there were already factors of commercialization in its traditional society. Second, industrialization and urbanization contributed significantly to the absorption of a large population outflow from the countryside as a result of the Enclosure Movement during the 18th and 19th centuries. Third, massive colonization helped to establish markets for the huge capacity of production brought about by industrialization and made it possible to import agricultural products to cover its domestic shortages. The outbreak of two world wars (WWI and WWII) smashed the world's existing colonial system. As a result, the United Kingdom's excessive dependence on imported agricultural products was increasingly highlighted. After WWII, the United Kingdom began to re-develop its agriculture and countryside and promote the coordinated development of industry and agriculture.

Japan is a rising modernized country and pioneer in the industrialization of Asia. Alongside its abrupt rise, it started wars to plunder resources and alleviate social contradictions which resulted from a large number of bankrupt farmers. Having lost WWII, Japan seized the opportunity of the Korean War to rapidly complete economic recovery and industrialization. During this process, however, its agriculture and rural areas were increasingly marginalized. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Japanese government introduced a strategy of rural revitalization and established sectors dedicated in this mission. In multiple ways, it strove to vitalize its rural areas and promote coordinated development of industry and agriculture.

From a perspective of world modernization, the coordinated development of industry and agriculture has three major characteristics. First, this coordinated development is dominated by industry. Without the development of modern industry, agriculture would have remained in a traditional form. The reason why so many developing countries have long been trapped in economic backwardness lies in their industrial underdevelopment. Second, there is relative development imbalance between industry and agriculture. In the early and middle stages of industrialization, industrial development was prioritized while agricultural development lagged behind. In the middle and late stages of industrialization, however, benefiting from the state capacity which is enhanced by industrial development, agricultural development enjoys more favorable conditions. Third, agricultural development (the coordinated development of industry and agriculture in particular) is incorporated into the national strategy. The development of industry and agriculture cannot be expected to automatically strike a balance. The discrepancy in their natures explains why they develop differently. Industry witnesses accelerated development, while agriculture, restricted by natural conditions, low returns and

high risks, is far less attractive to capital. State government should step in, introduce effective policies and create more favorable conditions for agricultural development. Only in this way can balanced development of industry and agriculture be realized. For this reason, most industrialized countries choose to boost their agricultural development by means of financial subsidies.

China had created the most brilliant agricultural civilization in world history. The Chinese people's confidence in their civilization, however, was shattered by the rise of overseas industry. Regarding this, Marx commented, "The Chinese industry based on hand labor was subjected to the competition of the machines. The hitherto unshakeable Central Empire experienced a social crisis" (Marx, 1998, p. 277). The Qing Empire (1636-1912), which was in its final stage, was not capable of coping with the tough challenges from industrial civilizations, and its severe and lingering illness and inertness was fully exposed in such a new context. "Before the British arms the authority of the Manchu dynasty fell to pieces; the superstitious faith in the eternity of the Celestial Empire broke down" (Marx, 1995, p. 779).

Driven by external challenges, China took the path of modernization. In the early stage of this modernization process, there were debates over whether China as a state should be based on industry or on agriculture. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a new national institution was established, and a process of massive modernization was initiated. Accordingly, being "industry-led and agriculture-based" was set as a basic policy. However, in the early years of modernization, the low levels of industrialization forced the Chinese government to implement an "industry first" strategy according to which agriculture should give full support to the development of industry. Benefiting from such a strategy, industrialization in China was significantly advanced. This progress, however, filled the gap in Chinese industrial growth but failed to grow into a substantial national capacity. More importantly, agricultural development was slowed. As of 1978, the rural population still accounted for 90% of the total population of China and most of the rural population were still living under the poverty line. Given this fundamental reality, China initiated its reform in rural areas and later expanded it to the whole country.

China's rural reform in the 1980s enabled relatively balanced development of its industry and agriculture. Yet, such balance was at the cost of a slow-down in industrial development. In the wake of the establishment of a socialist market economy in the 1990s, China accelerated its industrialization and attracted huge investments in industry, thus developing into the "world's factory" and placing industry in the position of absolute dominance. Entering the 21st century, China's value of industrial output far exceeded its agricultural output while its rural population was, for this first time ever, outnumbered by the urban population. In 2016 China's value of agricultural output only accounted for 8.6% of the total and the rural population dropped to less than 50%. Modernization in China stepped into the middle and late stages.

In the middle and late stages of modernization, the development of industry and agriculture

in China is in a brand-new context. Industrialization has helped the country accumulate a huge fiscal capacity, which has created more favorable conditions for agricultural development. China's rapid industrialization has made the saying that "without industry, the rural economy could not be rich" a society-wide consensus. Still, agriculture has lagged behind on the development path and China has become the "world's factory", not the "world's farm". In fact, China still relies heavily on importing some types of agricultural products. There is still a long way to go before China can be self-sufficient in agricultural supply. For a modern country, agricultural strength is as important as industrial strength.

Against such a backdrop, the CPC Central Committee introduced the key idea of "two trends" at the beginning of the 21st century. At the Fourth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee, which convened in 2004, then General Secretary Hu Jintao said, "A review of the development courses of some industrialized countries indicates two trends: First, in the early stage of industrialization the universal trend is that agriculture supports industry and offers resources to facilitate industrial development; second, when their industrialization reaches a fairly high level, the universal trend changes into 'industry nurtures agriculture and urban areas support rural areas' to achieve coordinated development of industry and agriculture, and of urban and rural areas" (Dong & Yao, 2005). It was based on this judgment that the "development of a new socialist countryside" strategy was introduced at the turn of the 21st century.

More than a decade later, "rural revitalization" appeared in the report to the 19th CPC National Congress. Rural revitalization can be deemed an extension of the "development of a new socialist countryside" strategy and its appearance means that as China's modernization approaches the middle and late stages, the imbalance between its industrial and agricultural development is increasingly highlighted. In the report to the 19th CPC National Congress, development imbalance and inadequacy (the industrial-agricultural development imbalance in particular) was identified as the principal contradiction in the new era. The Chinese government is now trying to solve the issue of imbalanced development of industry and agriculture by promoting rural revitalization.

Compared with other countries, China has a relatively low degree of agricultural modernization but a large rural population. Since the initiation of reform and opening up, hundreds of millions of rural residents have left their rural homeland for urban areas. Even so, there are still hundreds of millions of people sticking to their shrinking rural homeland. Such a reality determines that rural revitalization in China is to undergo a tougher-than-average process with more restrictions. To achieve rural revitalization, industrial revitalization is the key. Judging from the development courses of developed countries, agricultural modernization has a positive correlation with the reduction of the agricultural population and the expansion of the agricultural business scale. Substantial levels of farmland management are necessary for agricultural modernization, which is necessary for the reduction of the agricultural population,

which is necessary for the further expansion of farmland management. Yet currently there are hundreds of millions of small farms in rural China. How to adapt these small farms to modern agriculture is a priority for rural revitalization.

Meanwhile, rural revitalization in China should always be part of the context of modernization which must include industrialization. First, rural revitalization requires the support of state governments, whose fiscal capacity relies primarily on industrial development. Second, the reduction of the agricultural population, the level of agricultural modernization and the expansion of farmland management depend on the absorptive capacity of industry. If Chinese industry shrinks and the “world’s factory” declines, the material prerequisites for rural revitalization in China will be significantly impaired and rural China will have no chance to grow into the “world’s farm”. Thus, during the middle and late stages of modernization, China must improve the weak links of agriculture development through rural revitalization and continue to attach importance to industrial development. Only through the coordinated development of industry and agriculture can China better promote rural revitalization.

Urban-rural Integration and Rural Revitalization

During the evolution of human civilizations, social divisions of labor emerged, resulting in an urban-rural gap. According to Karl Marx, “The town in actual fact is the concentration of the population, of the instruments of production, of capital, of pleasures, of needs, while the country demonstrates just the opposite fact, their isolation and separation” (Marx, 1995, p. 104).

Judging from the process of modernization, modernity requires the elimination of the urban-rural gap, while the process itself results in such a gap, the very existence of which will in turn restrain modernization. Samuel Huntington once said, “One crucial political result of modernization is the gap it produces between countryside and city. This gap is, indeed, a preeminent political characteristic of societies undergoing rapid social and economic change. It is the primary source of political instability in such societies and a principal, if not the principal, obstacle to national integration” (Huntington, 2008, p. 55).

The global modernization process indicates that during the early and middle stages of modernization, the urban-rural gap was particularly prominent and that there was a rivalry between urban and rural areas. Marx thus argued, “It is the most crass expression of the subjection of the individual under the division of labor, under a definite activity forced upon him—a subjection which makes one man into a restricted town-animal, the other into a restricted country-animal, and daily creates anew the conflict between their interests” (Marx, 1995, p. 104). In the middle and late stages of modernization, however, striving to narrow and eliminate this urban-rural gap becomes a top priority for a country moving towards

modernization. After all, “The difference between the city and the countryside is the difference between the most modern and the most traditional parts of society. A fundamental problem of politics in a modernizing society is the development of the means for bridging this gap and re-creating through political means the social unity which modernization has destroyed” (Huntington, 2008, p. 56). In this regard, Marx emphasized, “The abolition of the antagonism between town and country is one of the first conditions of communal life, a condition which again depends on a mass of material premises and which cannot be fulfilled by the mere will, as anyone can see at the first glance” (Marx, 1995, pp. 104-105). The historical mission of modernization will not be accomplished until the urban-rural gap is eliminated. The urban-rural gap in developed countries today has been shrinking, and even basically eliminated in some countries.

Urban-rural gaps vary from country to country. China has a long history of being a centralized country which has exercised rural governance through urban institutions. Its urban-rural gap has been manifested as antagonism between town, as a political fortress, and countryside as an economic basis. In the mid-20th century, American sinologist John K. Fairbank said that thus from ancient times there had been two fields of China: “the myriad agricultural communities of the peasantry in the countryside, where each tree-clad village and farm household persists statically upon the soil; and the more mobile overlay of walled towns and cities peopled by the landlords, scholars, merchants, and officials—the families of property and position” (Fairbank, 1999, pp. 20-21). “Yet China has always remained a country of farmers, four fifths of the people living on the soil they till. The chief social division has therefore been that between town and countryside, between the 80 percent or more of the population, who have stayed put upon the land and the 10 or 15 percent of the population who have formed a mobile upper class. This bifurcation still underlies the Chinese political scene and makes it difficult to spread the control of the state from the few to the many” (Fairbank, 1999, pp. 20-21).

In modern times, as modernization advances, the urban-rural gap in China is manifested as a horizontal division between industry and agriculture. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, China gradually shaped a dual urban-rural structure to adapt to the strategy of prioritizing industrial development and making agriculture serve industrial development. Such a structure restricted rural development by institutional means, confining the rural population in the countryside, where there were fewer development opportunities and resources than in the cities. For instance, for a long time the agricultural taxation system compelled rural residents to pay agricultural taxes regardless of whether they had income or how much they earned. The government covered the charges of compulsory education and healthcare with government revenue, including taxes collected from farmers. This move was particularly common in the 1990s, when the formation of a socialist market economy channeled massive resources to urban China and further expanded the gap in incomes and

social developments between urban and rural areas. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese government abolished agricultural taxes, shifted its focus to the development of a new socialist countryside, and offered more support to the countryside in a bid to promote urban-rural integration.

The report to the 19th CPC National People's Congress put forth the strategy of rural revitalization and urban-rural integration. The strategy is a crucial one for China in its middle and late stages of modernization. To achieve integrated urban-rural development, China should keep narrowing the urban-rural gap and, more importantly, transform the dual urban-rural structure which has long restricted rural development to promote constructive urban-rural interactions and common development.

First, China should share the achievements of modernization among urban and rural residents. Unlike a traditional society, a modern society can produce more products enabling people to earn more through a variety of resources, assets, labor, and products. To this end, one essential condition is to establish a market mechanism.

In developed countries, agricultural population can earn income from a diversity of channels, of which asset channeling is a major one. Essential factors and assets both in urban and rural areas can be traded freely. For agricultural population, land is the most important resource and asset, which produces crops and is of investment value. Take the southern United Kingdom as an example. Over the past 30 years or so, farmland in southern United Kingdom has seen a five times increase in value. Its increase rate is equal to that of urban property values, which means there is no significant urban-rural gap in property income.

In China, for quite a long time, non-property income formed the largest part of the income of urban and rural residents. In the late 1990s, the urban housing system reform was launched. Following that, the commercial housing system came into operation. This new situation, along with the further advancement of urbanization, has brought about a rapid increase in the value of urban properties. Accordingly, urban residents have seen their property income increased by a big margin. By contrast, rural residents have not been able to enjoy such a dividend, as their major assets (farmland and rural properties) cannot be traded freely and therefore their value cannot be increased automatically. Rural residents mainly rely on agricultural production and labor services to earn income. Both of the two income channels feature a limited growth rate. In terms of property income, the urban-rural gap is not narrowing, but quickly expanding. Consequently, more rural residents are moving to urban areas, making rural revitalization more difficult.

In the middle and late stages of modernization, China must create conditions to allow both urban and rural residents to share the achievements of modernization. For example, China should accelerate the building of a strict system for agricultural land use control, create necessary conditions for land transfers, deregulate rural housing step by step, and introduce market allocations to non-agricultural land in the countryside. These measures are all designed

to ensure rural residents can earn more property income and make rural resources more attractive to investors to secure quality resources essential to the development of modern agriculture and the countryside.

Second, China should promote the integrated development of the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. In the process of modernization, one major cause for the urban-rural gap lies in a lack of industrial diversity in the countryside. In particular, the limited development potential of traditional agriculture makes it relatively difficult to increase farming related incomes and thus results in a large outflow of quality laborers to cities from the countryside. Without quality laborers, rural revitalization would be empty talk. To promote integrated urban-rural development, China should restructure and diversify its monotonous traditional agriculture and integrate the development of the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors in rural areas. In particular, the development of the secondary and tertiary sectors can help introduce essential urban factors to rural areas. For example, the development of rural tourism, rural homestay and distinctive resort towns can turn lucid waters and lush mountains into invaluable assets.

Third, China should strive for equal access to public services. In the early and middle stages of modernization, income was a primary factor that determined people's choice of work and life. For a higher income, a large number of rural residents left their homes for the cities. In the middle and late stages of modernization, the Chinese people, with their basic needs satisfied and moderate prosperity realized, now have an increasingly higher demand for public services. Rural residents continue to move to urban areas primarily for the purposes of better education, healthcare and social assistance. Against such a backdrop, integrated urban-rural development by providing equal access to public services becomes an important task for China.

Judging from the experience of developed countries, one key factor for the narrowing and elimination of the urban-rural gap and even the emergence of a counter-urbanization trend lies in the fact that people in rural areas can enjoy the same good public services as those available to urban residents while maintaining better natural and cultural conditions than their urban counterparts. In such a context, the traditional countryside can be redefined, for it is no longer a place populated only by agricultural laborers. Again, take the United Kingdom as an example. Its rural population accounts for 18% of its total population. Of the rural population, only 1% are agricultural laborers, and agricultural laborers, with equal access to public services, are also known as "townsfolk in the countryside".

Regional Balance and Rural Revitalization

A society always operates in an unbalanced state, while a country consists of multiple regions. In the early and middle stages of modernization, the shift from a traditional to a modern society widened the gaps between traditional agriculture and modern industry,

and between traditional rural and modern urban areas. In the middle and late stages of modernization, the industrial-agricultural gap and urban-rural gap in a traditional sense are shrinking, with their structural contradictions highlighted in a new form, i.e., regional gap.

The city is the driving force behind modernization. “Modernization is, in large part, measured by the growth of the city. The city becomes the locus of new economic activities, new social classes, new culture and education, which make it fundamentally different from the more tradition bound countryside” (Huntington, 2008, p. 55). As modernization accelerates, the structure of the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors changes and the importance of modern services rises. Various essential factors are gathering together in a central zone (megacity), forming an urban agglomeration, which has a core city surrounded by small and medium-sized cities. These urban agglomerations are combined to form a mainstay of national economic and social development. Such centralization, however, inevitably leads to marginalization (of other regions). Some regions are always at the margins of a country’s economic and social development. Subsequently, the existing industrial-agricultural and urban-rural gaps are replaced by a regional gap. Even in today’s most developed countries, regional gaps remain outstanding and have become a major challenge for state governance.

In 2016, the Gross National Product (GNP) of the Greater London Authority (GLA) exceeded 1/5 of the GNP of the United Kingdom and its GNP per capita topped the country. Finance and commerce dominated the economy of the GLA. Moreover, this region also featured a rapid increase in farmland values, favorable conditions for rural tourism and convenient public services. Thanks to this, GLA residents are more and more willing to live in the local countryside. In Scotland, which is in the north of the country, farmland prices are only half of, or even less than half of that of the GLA. Living conditions in rural Scotland are also worse than those in rural GLA. Such a regional gap has fueled a movement of national separatism in Scotland. As a result, while the United Kingdom is tormented by Brexit, it has to withstand the pressure of Scottish independence. Another example is the United States, which is also faced with the challenge of regional gaps. With the successive transfers of many traditional sectors overseas from the United States, modern service sectors have become a mainstay of the US economy. Accordingly, its laudatory title of the “world’s factory” has been replaced by the “world’s bank”. Yet, modern services, including the financial sector, can only cluster in cities, particularly megacities. Traditional industrial zones are on the wane, creating the so-called Rust Belt, which is characterized by underemployment, declining economies and arrested social development.

China, a country with a vast territory, has suffered disproportionate regional imbalances in development. In particular, the less developed western regions have lagged behind central and eastern China due to their historical burden and late start of modernization.

In the middle and late stages of modernization, the trend of centralization is increasingly highlighted. A number of super city clusters revolving around cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen are taking shape. These super city clusters, mostly located in eastern China, have formed the mainstay of the national economy. In 2017, their combined GNP exceeded RMB10 trillion, accounting for 1/8 of the GNP of China. Meanwhile in central China, a number of secondary city clusters, which revolve around provincial capitals, are also coming into being.

In the middle and late stages of modernization, rural revitalization requires more precise regional objectives, which must be implemented by region and by category.

First, rural revitalization does not mean vitalizing every village. It should be noted that the reduction of the agricultural population, along with the expansion of agricultural business, has become a basic trend in rural development worldwide. Under the influence of this trend, even developed countries have launched massive mergers of towns and villages. For example, the number of villages in Japan has at least been reduced by 1,000. Only by doing so can a country have sufficient fiscal capacity to offer equal public services to its rural residents. When implementing the strategy of rural revitalization, China should pay attention to the basic trends of reduction in agricultural populations and organizational mergers, improve its regional planning for rural revitalization, and avoid resource waste through rational and scientific planning.

Second, rural revitalization should prioritize the less developed regions of a country. Urban agglomerations, megalopolises in particular, with a huge urban driving force and an extensive influence scope, can create favorable external conditions for rural revitalization. In some regions, rural residents can have a higher income than urban residents, and rural registered permanent residences can be more valued than urban ones. For these regions, rural revitalization is more about promoting urban-rural exchange of essential factors and integrated development. For less developed regions, however, rural revitalization should be advanced with state support, such as fiscal transfers. Given that China's population living under the poverty line mainly live in western China, the main battlefield of poverty alleviation as an act of state should also be set there.

Third, rural revitalization should give full play to regional characteristics and advantages. Imbalanced regional development has been a historical problem in China. Some ethnic communities in western China are under harsh and uninhabitable natural conditions. Villages in these areas will gradually vanish as local residents move away. What the government can do is to provide necessary support so that those villages can eventually vanish in dignity. Yet, many regions in western China also enjoy a favorable ecology. In the middle and late stages of modernization, as people's demand for quality eco-environments grow, people in urban conglomerations of eastern China will be willing to move to some western regions with a better eco-environment. For this reason, rural revitalization in western China should attach more



importance to environmental restoration and ecological conservation so as not to follow eastern China's beaten track of "pollution before treatment". Regarding the integration of the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors, the integration of the primary and tertiary sectors is more vital to rural revitalization in western China.

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