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Rural Revitalization in China: Reversing Rural Decline and Eliminating Poverty

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ABSTRACT

Rapid urbanization in China in the last 4 decades was fuelled by a huge out-migration of people from the countryside, contributing to rural decline in many areas. Recognition of ongoing rural poverty and the need to modernize the rural economy has given rise to a myriad of policies in the last quarter century supporting rural development, notably in two key initiatives: Creating the New Socialist Countryside (2005) and a Rural Revitalization Strategy (2017). The former focussed on creating improvements to the welfare system, health services and education in rural areas, and was subsequently accompanied by concerted efforts to eliminate rural poverty. Rural revitalization has emphasized the need for agricultural modernization and reducing the income gap between the countryside and the cities. Based on an assessment of the implementation and outcomes of the two initiatives, this paper explores the policies and key events in the process of rural improvement and revitalization in China. It summarizes the development stages of the relevant policies over time and examines the key facets of revitalization. It focuses on increased provision of services in rural areas as part of significant reductions in rural poverty, the reorganisation of agriculture via land consolidation, and the growth of new investment in rural-based industry.

1 | Introduction

Massive rural-urban migration in China helped to transform the country as the urban population grew by around 550 million in the 4 decades after 1978 when major economic reforms were first introduced (C. Ding et al. 2024). As the major cities of eastern China acquired a huge pool of labour, the countryside was drained of many of its most vital population (Johnson and Lichter 2019; Qiao et al. 2016). Rural areas sacrificed agricultural surplus value and the rural labour force to create urbanization, contributing to capital accumulation and wealth creation in the mega-cities, primarily located in eastern China (C. Chen et al. 2018; Guan et al. 2018). Numerous problems were created in the countryside, including abandoned houses (X. Gao et al. 2017; Tao et al. 2021), the spread of rural poverty (Glauben et al. 2012; Y. Wang et al. 2018), declining rural services, and a rural economy lagging behind that of the vibrant cities (M. Chen et al. 2021). In acknowledging the scale of the problem, central government determined that major investment was required to promote rural development. From 2005, the focus was on reducing rural poverty and a raft of social measures, under the framework of 'building the new socialist countryside' (Ahlers and Schubert 2009), before formal rural revitalization measures were introduced from 2017 (Y. Li et al. 2019).

The measures adopted in 2005, aimed at the 800 million rural residents, were geared towards creating more rural investment, developing agricultural subsidies to stimulate production and improving social services. This marked a move away from the dominant economic growth mantra that had supported the so-called Chinese 'economic miracle' (Lin et al. 2004) and was aimed at redistributing resources and rebalancing income between rural and urban areas. Long-established agricultural taxes were removed and farm subsidies raised. However, social measures were uppermost, addressing an ambitious plan to drastically cut rural poverty (Harwood 2013). Rural revitalization initiatives aim to reconfigure urban-rural dynamics as a strategy for narrowing regional income disparities (P. Liu et al. 2023; Y. Liu et al. 2020; Steiner and Fan 2019). Key approaches include fostering economic diversification (J. Li et al. 2021), agricultural modernization, and innovations in rural governance (J. Han 2020). These efforts are further supported through optimized land-use coordination (Q. Huang et al. 2020) and enhanced rural living conditions (S. Liu et al. 2022).

In contrast, the more recent revitalization measures have emphasized rural production, not only to address food security concerns through massive reorganization of farms via land consolidation, but also to broaden the rural economy through new rural job opportunities in the manufacturing and service sectors (Y. Zhou et al. 2020). This paper traces the past 2 decades of policies to tackle rural decline in China, focussing first on the policies introduced from 2005 and then the more recent revitalization measures to gain a deeper understanding about the nature of Chinese rural development and the implementation of associated policies.

2 | Reviving Rural Areas

The need for rural revival in China reflects a broader concern about rural futures that has been translated into similar policies in many parts of the world, especially since the 1970s (Frey 1987; Morrison and Wheeler 1976), notably in several east and south-east Asian countries and the European Union (EU). For example, Japan developed the *mura okoshi undo* (village revival movement) after the Second World War to deal with large-scale economic and population decline of villages, and to generate greater self-reliance, using internal resources of villages to create better living conditions (Hisano et al. 2018; Knight 1993, 1994). 'One village, one product' (OVOP), which emerged in Oita Prefecture in 1961, was the prototype for rural revitalization in Japan, in which villages use their available resources to develop products with local characteristics (Fujimoto 1992; J. Shen and Chou 2022). This model has been adopted more recently in parts of Africa and Latin America (Mukai and Fujikura 2015).

In the 1970s, the *Saemaul* movement emerged in South Korea as a development initiative for rural communities, with the goal of promoting economic development and cultural modernization in the countryside (Park 2 012; Sonn and Gimm 2013). Similar ideas have been pursued more recently in Indonesia (Rusdiono and Sudagung 2024), Thailand (Anh 2013) and Vietnam (Hoang Thanh et al. 2018). Thailand launched the 'One Tambon, One Product' (OTOP) policy in 2001 (where *tambon* is the local government unit), based on Japan's OVOP, as a means of reducing poverty (Natsuda et al. 2012). The Malaysian government also launched a similar policy, 'One-District-One-Industry' (ODOI) in 2003. A key difference is that in Malaysia the focus was on promoting the development of small industries to increase rural employment opportunities and raise incomes (Kader et al. 2009).

In the EU, whilst maintaining farm incomes has been a long-term concern of the Common Agricultural Policy, more broadly based rural revival has been addressed via the LEADER programme, launched in 1991, involving local actors in rural development by forming Local Action Groups (LAGs), and designing and implementing key strategies (Ballesteros and Hernández 2019; Dax et al. 2016). LEADER has provided rural communities across the EU with resources, enabling local partners to actively engage and direct community-led rural development (Granberg et al. 2016). The LEADER programme does not only emphasize the concept of local products and rural industries, but it also applies to a wider range of concerns, similar to the *Saemaul* movement and the revitalization measures adopted more recently in China, as discussed below.

The various policies tackling the need to reverse long-term rural decline can be divided into bottom-up and top-down according to the direction of policy implementation and central-local participation (Figure 1). It should be noted that in contrast to measures in Japan, Malaysia and Thailand, rural revitalization in China reflects strong central government policy, that is top-down, but tackling rural development on a large scale nationwide in terms of the various socio-economic elements addressed.

China's rural revitalization policies exhibit greater comprehensiveness in scope compared with those implemented in East and Southeast Asian countries. These measures encompass multidimensional interventions, including land consolidation, agricultural mechanization, rural infrastructure development, and industrial diversification. The Rural Comprehensive Revitalization Plan (2024–2027) released in January 2025 further reinforces this integrated approach, with explicit targets addressing: food security assurance, rural income growth, accelerated green transition, and facilitation of foreign investment in rural sectors (Huld 2025).

Bottom-up →			***Top-down***
OVOP, OTOP, ODOI	LEADER Programme	Saemaul movement	Rural Revitalization
Project scope ***Small*** →			***Large***

FIGURE 1 | Policy direction and project scope of rural development programmes.

3 | Five-Year Plans and No. 1 Central Documents

Based on China's top-down economic management system, rural and agricultural development is largely shaped by the decisions of the central government in Beijing (Song et al. 2023). Five-Year Plans and No. One Central Documents are important policies issued by the central government to guide the national planned economy, government macroeconomic regulation and rural development. The former are China's long-term strategies for national economic and social development, with successive Plans operating since 1953 to express the country's strategic intentions, clarify the government's work priorities, and guide the behaviour of market entities (D. Chen et al. 2017). Meanwhile, the No. One Central Document is the first document released by the Chinese government every year to guide policies addressing the 'three rural' issues (*san nong wen ti*), referring to agricultural production, rural development and peasant income (Z. Zhang 2023; G. H. Zhou et al. 2023).

The need to address rural development issues at the beginning of the 21st century reflected a recognition by central government that many parts of rural China had been impoverished by rapid large-scale outmigration. So, while the mega-cities of eastern China were booming and supporting unprecedented rates of economic growth, many rural areas, especially in western China, were lagging (Christiaensen et al. 2013; Dunford and Li 2010; Ravallion and Jalan 1999), with the gap between urban and rural areas widening with respect to household income throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Luo et al. 2020; Zhong et al. 2022). This was conceptualized as a need to address the three rural issues. Key problems included the small scale and fragmented nature of farms associated with the peasant economy, and difficulties in connecting the agricultural industry to the rapidly expanding market economy (X. Chen 2018; G. H. Zhou et al. 2023). Some of these issues were addressed in spatially-based regional development programmes. for example, the Western Development Strategy, introduced in 2000 (Jia et al. 2020).

In 2000, the average farm size was less than 1 ha, with China accounting for nearly 40% of the world's farms under 1 ha (J. Huang and Ding 2016). However, these farms were operated by individual farm families following tenure reforms in 1978. The land is owned by the village but households have use rights, which can be leased out. In the 2000s, it was argued that the three most prominent problems were village hollowing, agricultural marginalization linked to farm size, and farmer ageing (X. Chen 2019), the former referring to rural out-migration that had led to widespread abandonment of farms and agricultural land (Robinson 2024, 62). These problems had seriously affected rural social and economic development. They were addressed in policies introduced via the 5-year plans.

Table 1 summarises the evolution and timing of major rural policies during China's four 5-year plans since 2005, including the successive No. One Central Documents. It summarises the development process of rural revitalization policies and indicates the overall rural development direction and characteristics of the revitalization strategy.

Table 1 demonstrates that China's rural development policies have evolved systematically in response to the *Sannongwenti* (three rural issues). A consistent policy priority has been raising farmers' incomes, to be achieved through targeted poverty alleviation programmes and measures to reduce urban-rural income disparities. Within the agricultural sector, policy interventions have emphasised: modernisation through infrastructure development and mechanisation; sustainable land management via consolidation and ecological restoration; and integration of these measures within the broader rural revitalization framework. The table further delineates the progression of rural development strategies across different periods, particularly highlighting policy shifts in agriculture. Following this overview, the paper traces the policy evolution chronologically: 1) The New Socialist Countryside initiative (Section 4), 2) A New Rural Construction phase (Section 5), and 3) The Rural Revitalization strategy (Section 6), incorporating land consolidation, urban-rural integration, and poverty reduction measures.

4 | Building the New Socialist Countryside

In the 2000s China's central government recognised a significant wealth gap between the fast-growing cities and a depopulating countryside. There was widespread rural poverty and a tax burden on farmers in the form of agricultural taxes. Several measures were introduced to counter this situation, starting with abolition of these taxes and improved programmes of public provision, notably new rural co-operative medical schemes (NRCMS) and new rural pensions (NRP). Targeted at the poor, sick and elderly rural residents these social welfare measures were gradually increased in value, though rural provision still lagged behind urban counterparts. Basic rural pensions in mid- and western China were fully subsidised by central government, which funded 50% for the eastern provinces. In the NRCMS, county-level government organised schemes to fund costs of health care with contributions by households and central government. The latter included subsidies to poorer localities and coordinating committees to implement the schemes (Duckett and Wang 2017, 100).

In 2006 the aim of building a new socialist countryside (NSC) subsumed both the NRCMS and NRP, enshrining the principle of universal entitlement to basic social provision in rural areas, with spending expanded subsequently on both rural health care and rural pensions. Rural residents still receive less than urban citizens, but a 'minimum livelihood guarantee' (*dibao*) had been created, contributing to substantial reductions in rural poverty (see below). A new fiscal system of transfer payments to poor local governments was introduced, with greater scrutiny of key projects to ensure targets were met. The NSC also brought about greater investment in agricultural modernization, including village-based food processing to provide more rural employment, and expansion of social welfare.

An evaluation of the NSC by Ahlers (2014) highlighted that positive outcomes depended greatly on how central government policies were actioned through local development plans. She differentiated between the wide-ranging aim of the policies and the nature of their local implementation, which depends greatly

TABLE 1 | Rural revitalization: Development stages and important events.

Strategy	Five-year plans	Topic of central document No.1	Key events in the development of rural revitalization policies
New rural construction (2005–2011): Aiming to increase farmers' incomes and improve agricultural infrastructure	Eleventh five-year Plan (2006–2010)	2006: Promote the construction of a 'new socialist countryside'. 2007: Actively develop modern agriculture and promote the construction of a new socialist countryside. 2008: Strengthen the construction of agricultural infrastructure; further promote agricultural development, and increase farmers' incomes. 2009: Promote the stable development of agriculture and continue to increase farmers' incomes. 2010: Increase the overall planning of urban and rural development and further consolidate the foundation of agricultural and rural development.	In October-November 2005, the fifth Plenary Session of the 16th central committee of the CPC proposed to promote the construction of a new socialist countryside in accordance with the requirements of 'production development, affluent life, civilized rural customs, clean and tidy villages, and democratic management.'
New rural construction (2012–2016): The stage of agricultural modernization	Twelfth five-year Plan (2011–2015)	2011: Speed up the reform and development of water conservation. 2012: Accelerate the promotion of agricultural science and technology innovation and continuously enhance the ability to guarantee the supply of agricultural products. 2013: Accelerate the development of modern agriculture and further enhance the vitality of rural development. 2014: Comprehensively deepen rural reform and accelerate agricultural modernization. 2015: Increase reform and innovation efforts to accelerate agricultural modernization. (Promoting the integrated development of primary, secondary and tertiary industries in rural areas.)	In 2012, the 18th Congress of the CPC proposed the overall layout of socialist construction: It referred to 'five-in-one,' a catch-phrase that defines five key development priorities for 'comprehensive promotion,' namely: Economic, political, cultural, societal and ecological.' It also re-emphasized the 'four modernizations': To strengthen the fields of agriculture, industry, defence and technology.
The decisive battle to 'completing a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way' and the rise of rural revitalization (2017–2020)	Thirteenth five-year Plan (2016–2020)	2016: Implement the new concept of development, accelerate agricultural modernization, and achieve the goal of a well-off society in an all-round way. 2017: Deepen the structural reform of the agricultural supply side and accelerate the cultivation of new driving forces for agricultural and rural development. 2018: Implement the rural revitalization strategy. 2019: Adhere to the priority development of agriculture and rural areas and do a good job regarding 'agriculture, rural areas and farmers.' 2020: Pursue key tasks in the field of 'agriculture, rural areas and farmers' to ensure the realization of a comprehensive moderately prosperous	2017: The 19th national Congress of the CPC formally introduced the rural revitalization strategy, explicitly incorporating agricultural green development as a core component. This policy direction was further operationalized through the Ministry of agriculture and rural Affairs' 'Notice on the implementation of the five major actions for green agricultural development' (2017), which provided specific implementation guidelines. 2018: Government work Report: 'National rural revitalization strategic Plan.' On March 5, 2019, in the 2019 government work Report of the state Council, Premier Li Keqiang proposed that China should advance poverty

(Continues)

Strategy	Five-year plans	Topic of central document No.1	Key events in the development of rural revitalization policies
		society as scheduled (one village, one product, one county, one industry).	alleviation and rural revitalization in line with the task of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects. He stated that, 'By adhering to the priority development of agriculture and rural areas, strengthening the overall co-ordination of poverty alleviation and rural revitalization, and ensuring that the poverty alleviation goals are achieved as scheduled and farmers' lives reach a comprehensive moderately prosperous level, in 2020, the goal of building a well-off society in an all-round way will be realized.' Fully realize poverty alleviation.
Comprehensively promote the stage of rural revitalization (2021–2023)	Fourteenth five-year Plan (2021–2025)	2022: Comprehensively promote the key tasks of rural revitalization. 2023: Comprehensively promote the key tasks of rural revitalization. (Emphasizes an 'agricultural power country.')	2021: Rural revitalization promotion Law. 2021: Establish the national rural revitalization Bureau on the basis of the former state Council poverty alleviation and develop-ment Group Office. 2022: The 20th national Congress of the CPC proposes a strong agricultural country and high-standard farmland.

on local politicians and bureaucracy, who provide place-specific interpretation of over-arching policy. These local actions can both hinder and promote innovation, and can involve corruption amongst officials (A. Chen 2020). However, citizens' complaints have led to major crackdowns on corruption in the last decade (L. Han et al. 2022; Zhao et al. 2020).

Another key aspect of the NSC was an acceleration of systemic reform of rural education, to upgrade and improve the quality of teaching facilities and teaching staff via concentrated investment and funds from governments at all levels (D. Ding and Zheng 2015). This has greatly reduced the number of rural schools, with primary schools in rural areas shrinking from 416,000 in 2001 to 155,000 in 2012 (D. Wang and Teng 2022). Counties (*xian*) rather than townships (*xiangzhen*) were given responsibility for compulsory education. This process of school consolidation meant that many children faced a long journey to school each day or they had to board or move to live near the school. The latter was often accompanied by mothers and/or grandparents moving with the children to look after them (a process termed *peidu*).

Typically, schools are concentrated in administrative centres, such as county towns, so people have moved from more remote rural areas to small towns where other services can be concentrated. Related negative consequences of this migration include land abandonment, with over 25% of land owned by *peidu* households left idle, compared with just 7.7% in non-*peidu* households (D. Wang and Teng 2022). Closures of rural schools have notably accelerated in coal mining areas, especially in the north-east, as mine closures have occurred since 2016 as part of moves towards greater reliance on 'green' energy (G. He et al. 2020). Further rural school closures are expected, reflecting the impacts of declining birth rates, with total fertility rates (total births per woman over her childbearing years) currently around 1.0 compared with a rate of 2.1 needed for population replacement. There has been a 50% fall in registered births since 2016 (Kirkegaard 2024).

5 | New Rural Construction: The Stage of Agricultural Modernization

In 2012, the 18th National Congress proposed the so-called 'five-in-one' key development priorities, referring to five dimensions: economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological civilization (environmental sustainability) (Hansen et al. 2018). The aim is to achieve coordinated, holistic and sustainable development towards 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' in the five dimensions (Y. Zhou et al. 2018), in part via promotion of agricultural modernization. This recognised that agriculture was still a lagging sector, and with the lag further intensifying (Y. Zhang and Diao 2020). Hence, government invested more heavily in agricultural technological innovation within an overall modernization process. This also reflected increasing concern regarding food security, with China possessing just 10% of the world's arable land but needing to feed 17.3% of the world's population (Y. Liu and Zhou 2021). Within Chinese policy discourse, the concept of 'food security' is operationalized primarily as grain self-sufficiency—a definition that diverges from both international academic literature and institutional frameworks like the FAO's. This distinct interpretation has been institutionalized since 1996 through the State Council's White Paper on 'The Grain Issue in China', which established maintaining ≥ 95% grain self-sufficiency as a core policy objective. However, the magnitude of the problem was further indicated by China's population doubling between 1951 and 1986, and then increasing by a further 25% by 2010. Subsidies from all levels of government for fertilizers, machinery, improved crop varieties, agribusiness and marketing featured prominently in this phase of 'rural construction' (Bai et al. 2022; J. Huang et al. 2013; Lopez et al. 2017).

The limited extent of agricultural modernization was seen by government as a threat to food security, although China accounts for around 20% of global food production (including 18% of the world's cereal grains, > 40% of rice, 29% of meat, and half the world's vegetables) (Lv et al. 2022). Loss of farmland to urban sprawl and forestry plus dietary changes amongst Chinese consumers have placed increasing pressure on farmers to meet rising demand as China has become the world's largest food importer (US$140 billion in 2023) (Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) 2024). The goal was to transform traditional agriculture, involving a focus on new types of farmers: better educated, more skilled, and possessing business ability (P. Chen et al. 2025). This recognized the low levels of farmer education, acting as a barrier to acceptance of new methods and modern technology. However, another major problem to tackle remains the very small size of Chinese farms. In the late 1970s, through the household responsibility system (HRS), there was a move from a collective or village responsibility for rural land management to an individual basis, whereby households make decisions about the land they farm, albeit often with significant input from village heads (Ho 2001; Y. Zhou et al. 2020).

In 2010 over four-fifths of farm households farmed < 0.6 ha, and the proportion of households farming > 1 ha was only 7.9% (Lowder et al. 2016; M. Tan et al. 2013). Such small farms limit the capacity for productive investment by households, so mechanization has often advanced through contractors supplying machinery in several different regions in succession. However, central government stressed the need for economies of scale, which have taken several different forms, including re-collectivization in the form of farmer co-operatives, the growth of large-scale agribusinesses (termed 'dragonheads') for produce processing, and using land consolidation to create larger holdings to be operated by business-minded farmers ('specialized big households,' broadly termed 'family farms' in the Chinese literature). This 'de-peasantization' of the countryside was to be funded in part by urban industrial and commercial capital being applied to the countryside and invested in agriculture, referred to as 'capital going to the countryside' to establish 'capitalized agriculture' (Robinson 2024, 142). Several aspects of this attempt to create a more modern agricultural sector were then enshrined in new measures introduced in 2017.

6 | Rural Revitalization

A rural revitalization strategy was proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2017 as part of delivering 'a moderately prosperous society' and further alleviating poverty. The strategy aimed to deliver 'prosperous industry, ecological liveability, civilized rural style, effective governance, and rich life' (Du and Jiao 2023) and referred to the 'three rural issues,' but further supported agricultural modernization. In addition, rural revitalization emphasizes the green development of agriculture, and the overall goal is 'to realize the transformation of agriculture with high resource consumption and high environmental costs into a green agriculture and countryside with high productivity, high resource use efficiency and low environmental impact' (J. Shen et al. 2020, 5).

Increasingly, the policy focus with regard to China's agricultural development has shifted 'from a high-input and high-environmental footprint model to a model based upon sustainable intensification' (F. Zhang et al. 2020, 5). Accordingly, since 2017, emphasis has been placed on 'green agriculture and countryside,' with high productivity, high resource use efficiency and low environmental impact (Z. Shen et al. 2024, 2023), linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Current agricultural modernization efforts emphasize three key priorities: integrated crop-livestock systems, organic production methods, and enhanced quality standards for food processing and labelling. While regional disparities persist in the adoption of green agriculture (F. Zhou and Wen 2023), overall progress is evident. This transition has been accelerated by expanding digital infrastructure, particularly through improved rural internet connectivity enabling advanced agricultural technologies (Dai et al. 2023; Hong et al. 2023; Jiang et al. 2022). Notably, these practices are now being implemented even in geographically challenging regions like the Sichuan Tibetan Area (W. Wang et al. 2022).

The 2017 statement represents a continuation of policies from the 2000s aimed at delivering the NSC, and re-emphasising the 'five-in-one' catchphrase. Their goals are consistent, but rural revitalization proposes higher requirements for rural development (Table 2) and, as illustrated in Figure 2, is aimed at multiple sectors. With the need to develop more entrepreneurial farmers, the implication is that there will be greater differentiation of rural society. There will be more people without direct access to land and resources, but more opportunities for paid employment if rural industrialization initiatives succeed.

6.1 | Land Consolidation

A key multidimensional role was specified for land consolidation, to influence population agglomeration, rural industrial development, and to redress rural decline by optimizing the allocation of land resources (Long et al. 2019). The intended benefits of land consolidation are to increase the area and quality of cultivated land, improve the efficiency of land resource utilization, optimize the structure and layout of land use, and promote large-scale farm operations. Wider aims are to contribute to agricultural modernization and rural tourism while increasing production, providing environmental gains, beautifying rural scenery, and creating a more liveable environment (Y. Zhou et al. 2020). The investment associated with land consolidation reflects a trend towards an increased focus on rural infrastructure dating at least to the Coordinated Urban

TABLE 2 | 'Five-in-one': the new socialist countryside and rural revitalization.

Overall layout of socialist construction: 'Five-in-one'	New socialist countryside	Rural revitalization
Economic	Advanced production (*shengchan fazhan*)	Industrial prosperity (*chanye xingwang)*
Political	Democratic management (*guanli minzhu*)	Effective governance (*zhili youxiao*)
Cultural	Rural civilization (*xiangfeng wenming*)	Rural civilization (*xaingfeng wenming*)
Social	Comfortable life (*shenghuo kuanyu*)	Affluent life (*shenghuo fuyu*),
Ecological civilization	Clean and tidy villages (*cunrong zhengjie*)	Ecological liveability (*shengtai yiju*)

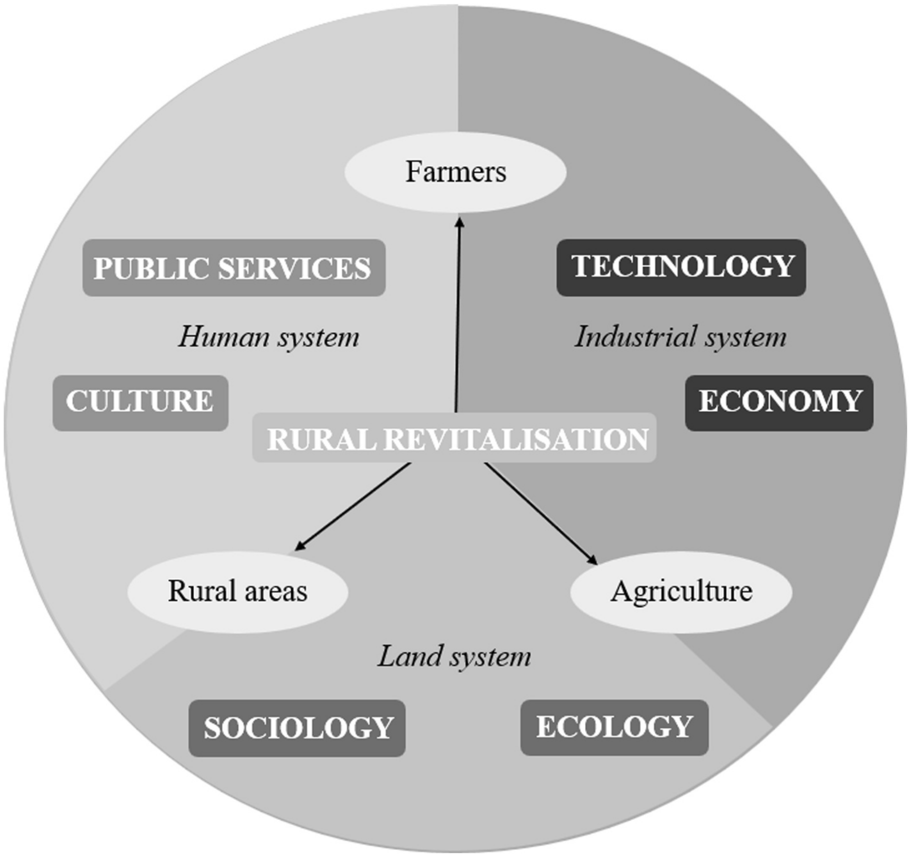

FIGURE 2 | Conceptualisation of the rural revitalization strategy. *Source:* Based on Y. Liu (2018b).

and Rural Development Strategy introduced in 2003 (L. Shen et al. 2012).

As a technical policy, one of the core functions of land consolidation is to alleviate land fragmentation, which is linked to fragmented land ownership and management. China's land ownership reforms can be linked to the household responsibility system introduced in the late 1970s to early 1980s (S. Tan et al. 2006). This policy emphasized egalitarian land distribution by allocating use rights to individual households, which resulted in highly fragmented landholdings characterized by small, geographically dispersed plots. Thus, the policy had the unintended consequence of institutionalizing land fragmentation Thus, the policy had the unintended consequence of institutionalizing land fragmentation (Lu et al. 2022). In contrast, the 'three-rights separation' policy, implemented around 2014, separates ownership, contract, and management rights of agricultural land, stimulating the rural land market by enabling land transfers to create larger holdings. This aims to encourage agricultural modernization by allowing for larger-scale farming and investment in agricultural technology (W. Han et al. 2023; M. Gong et al. 2022; Q. Wang and Zhang 2017).

Land consolidation in China predates Xi's proposal, with systematic promotion since 1998, but its progress has accelerated since 2017. One estimate is that between 2006 and 2017, there were around 200,000 separate land consolidation projects, with a total investment of US$6.9 billion, affecting 18.6 million ha (R. Tan et al. 2020; R. Wang and Tan 2020; Y. Zhou et al. 2020). From a simple focus on increasing the cultivated area, it has morphed into a more wide-ranging measure to promote rural development. It often involves using land and housing (termed 'construction land') abandoned by rural-urban migrants in several villages, with larger farm units created, the quality of farmland improved, and villagers resettled on a new site in new housing. So, the process affects housing, living conditions, livelihoods and income, with services concentrated in the new village and newly emerging industries also located there creating new jobs. The grouping and combining of rural settlements reduces expenses associated with costs of local government. Between 2000 and 2017 this process added 4.3 million ha of cultivated land and created 40 million ha of farmland with high yields (Martindale 2021; Tong et al. 2020). Substantial land transfers accompanied this process to create larger farm units capable of supporting greater mechanization and modern technology. This has advanced fastest in the north-east grain producing area where the terrain favours use of larger machines.

Land consolidation has also been one of the means of improving environmental conditions in the countryside after decades of neglect. Schemes aimed at producing a 'beautiful countryside' have been implemented, often through local government initiatives (C. Gao et al. 2019; X. N. Yu 2019). In accordance with the stated aims of rural revitalization policy, these have increasingly attempted to utilize greater participation by rural residents, to overcome problems associated with limited local organizational leadership, insufficient local government services, and inadequately functioning villagers' self-government, which have been key obstacles to implementing rural revitalization (J. Han 2020).

Land consolidation plays a key role in enhancing land productivity, improving rural production and living conditions. Its role in the restructuring of rural production, living and ecological spaces involves the optimization and restructuring of suitable living space, with amenity, intensive and highly efficient production space combined with ecological gains, such as reduced pollution into water-courses (Long 2020). The objectives of land consolidation have gradually shifted towards more emphasis on landscape protection and environmental improvements alongside production goals (Yin et al. 2023). Project outcomes are usually delivered by township governments, sometimes to the detriment of individual village interests, through local collective action, for example rural collective organizations, by playing multiple roles as grassroots managers, independent legal persons and representatives of rural interests, are expected to provide 'guiding leadership' for rural land consolidation (Y. Gong and Tan 2021; Pan et al. 2023).

6.2 | Changes in Urban-Rural Relations

A key innovation in the rural revitalization strategy has been a sharp focus on problems associated with unbalanced urban and rural development, especially the 'lagging' rural sector (Y. Liu 2018a). This conceptualizes rural development within the framework of urban-rural integration (H. Huang et al. 2024), signifying urban-rural relationships shifting away from urban economic dominance to what is increasingly referred to as a new type of urbanization with two-way interaction between urban and rural areas (M. Chen et al. 2021). This builds upon over 30 years of 'new city' developments in China (Woodworth and Chien 2022), but emphasizes the quality of urban development and not just building to accommodate population growth. It was conceived as part of the national strategic urbanization plan (2014—2020), with aims to reduce energy demands, improve infrastructure, and make dynamic ecological improvements by zoning 20% of municipal regions as ecological protection areas (B. Yu 2021).

Thus, it is argued that urban-rural integration is the principal path to realizing rural revitalization, and is viewed as a necessary condition for China to break urban-rural economic, social, and spatial dualism to establish a new urban-rural relationship (K. Chen et al. 2020; Y. Liu 2018b; Y. Zhang 2021). This idea acknowledges that the economies of urban and rural areas are complementary, but to reduce the wealth gap between them requires allocating public resources in a more balanced manner. It also requires the application of entrepreneurship in rural areas, as illustrated in the emergence of e-commerce employed by rural businesses and rural tourism (e.g., Robinson et al. 2022). These are helping to improve the level of rural-urban integration by promoting exchange of products, information and investment between urban and rural areas (H. Huang et al. 2024). Grouping and combining of rural settlements is enabling residents to share urban governance services.

Reducing the gap in rights and opportunities between urban and rural areas is also important (X. Wang et al. 2019). This refers to China's unique household registration system (HRS), whereby every citizen is legally obliged to register the location and type of household status or *hukou* (urban or rural). The HRS was originally established in the 1950s to prevent large-scale outflow of rural population, control the population capacity of large cities, and ensure the supply of basic living goods and social welfare in cities (Cheng and Selden 1994). However, this institutional arrangement has caused division between urban and rural areas, and there are obvious differences in access to public services, such as education, health care, housing and retirement benefits, between urban and rural residents (Treiman 2012). Over time, government has gradually relaxed restrictions on spatial migration, opened up the job market, and the number of rural residents looking for work in cities has surged (Afridi et al. 2015; Chan 2018). However, current HRS reforms are progressing slowly. The key lies in the corresponding public service cost burden of the reforms and the cost-benefit perception bias of stakeholders (T. Li 2016). Central government is still trying to further relax HRS restrictions and create better conditions for urban-rural integration, and there are a growing number of integrative projects. For example, in terms of pensions, urban pension rights have been extended to citizens with rural *hukou* in some cases, for example, Jiaxing City, Zhejiang Province (J. Wang 2019). This is part of attempts to extend service access and rights enjoyed by city dwellers to rural inhabitants as part of addressing institutional and policy differences between urban and rural areas.

It is argued that urban-rural integration can help to adjust the structure of urban and rural industries and employment, realizing coordinated development of urban and rural economies and contributing to agricultural modernization, especially via promoting rural industrialization (J. Wang et al. 2024; Xie et al. (2025). More government support is being directed to rural industry, especially service industries, to help rural areas develop a broader economic base, creating jobs, opportunities for farm diversification and improvements to farmers' income, thereby contributing to agricultural modernization and helping agriculture to become multifunctional (Long et al. 2022; Song and Robinson 2020). The core of rural industry revitalization is to promote both the structural reform of the agricultural supply side and a deeper integration of the rural primary, secondary and tertiary sectors (Y. Liu 2018b).

6.3 | Alleviating Rural Poverty

Despite the wide range of policy measures targeting rural development, there has remained a substantial imbalance in incomes between the cities and the countryside, and also between eastern and western China, clearly reflected in significant levels of rural poverty especially in western China (L. Y. He et al. 2018). Consequently, beginning in the mid-1980s, Chinese authorities implemented multiple poverty alleviation initiatives targeting lagging economic growth and stagnant rural incomes, particularly in central and western regions. These efforts adopted a dual approach combining geographic targeting with development-oriented strategies. Post-2000, these strategies have been complemented by the introduction of improved social welfare in rural areas, aimed at building what the central government has termed a 'moderately prosperous society.'

Both of the strategies highlighted in Table 2 have comprised elements directed at poverty alleviation. It must be emphasized, though, that poverty reduction predates building the NSC, with severe poverty falling from the early 1980s as the economy grew rapidly. Nevertheless, per capita income in cities in the 2000s was almost three times higher than that in rural areas, a gap that contributed to the continuing large-scale rural-urban migration (Hertel and Zhai 2006; Sicular et al. 2007). To address this, Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA) measures were launched in 2013, and poverty alleviation emerged as an important part of national economic and social development for the first time (Y. Liu et al. 2018, 2017). The targeted poverty alleviation strategy implemented since 2013 has marked a fundamental shift from area-based to household-centred poverty targeting (Y. Liu et al. 2020; World Bank and Development Research Center (DRC) of the State Council and the People's Republic of China 2022).

A key characteristic of TPA was formulating a unified method for identifying poverty alleviation targets to precisely direct assistance to poor communities, involving measures addressing educational provision, tourism development, employment assistance, relocation from poor villages, ecological compensation, and improvement of social security (Y. Zhou et al. 2018).

TPA involved the relocation of millions of rural people, especially those living in remote villages, into new apartment complexes often located in small towns and regional cities but also in rural areas near to the original villages of the rural poor. Sometimes this accompanied land consolidation projects (Y. Zhou et al. 2019). So, relocation has contributed to improved standards of housing and living conditions for those affected (S. Zhou et al. 2024). Added to this, rural wages and farm incomes have grown as the market economy has steadily penetrated even into remote rural areas, often with incomes supplemented from new sources, for example, tourism, food processing and rural industry, all promoted by government investment and incentives. Following the implementation of TPA, from 2012 to the end of 2020, nearly 99 million rural poor people and 128,000 poverty-stricken villages were lifted out of poverty, based on Chinese definitions of poverty, in which 'poverty-stricken' refers to administrative villages where the incidence of poverty is more than double that of the entire province, and the per capita net income of farmers in the village is less than 60% of the provincial average (Yang and Liu 2021).

Using the World Bank's definition of poverty, namely the percentage of people living on the equivalent of US$1.90 or less per day in 2011 purchasing price parity terms, China's poverty rate declined from 88% in 1981 to < 1.0% in 2015. Indeed, > 75% of global poverty reduction was represented by the declining numbers living in poverty in China between 1990 and 2005 (Ravallion 2012). Yet, pockets of rural poverty remain and many rural residents live barely above this poverty line. Despite this, between 2007 and 2023, the ratio of per capita disposable income of urban to rural residents in China fell from 3.19:1 in 2007 to 2.64:1 in 2019, and further to 2.39:1 in 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics 2024). In 2023, the average annual per capita disposable income of rural households in China was about 40% of that of urban households (Liang 2024), and, with the active adjustment of rural development policies, the gap between urban and rural household income is gradually narrowing. Moreover, 'China's poverty reduction story is primarily a growth story' (World Bank and DRC 2022: p.ix).

7 | Conclusion

In the past 4 decades, the Chinese government has introduced a series of policies and measures to combat rural decline. With the implementation of some key strategies, notably Building the New Socialist Countryside (NSC) and Rural Revitalization, greater investment has occurred in rural services, education and welfare provision, contributing to poverty alleviation. Under Rural Revitalization measures, wide-ranging landscape and settlement reorganization associated with land consolidation has been complemented by multifunctional agriculture, rural industrialization and pro-environment measures whilst attempting to reduce the wealth disparities between the countryside and the major cities. The scope of these actions exceeds the village revival schemes adopted elsewhere in east and southeast Asia and they have substantially reduced rural poverty, though without eliminating wealth imbalances between urban and rural.

From the experience of China's rural development, we have learned that the government has had to establish a framework and clear policy goals to cope with changes in different periods whilst maintaining policy continuity. However, a key lesson is that urban development should not be at the expense of rural interests, although this is not uncommon in the development of many East Asian and Southeast Asian countries. If urban and rural development becomes too imbalanced, it will inevitably distort economic growth and it becomes hard to bridge the gap between urban prosperity and relative rural disadvantage.

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Ethics Statement

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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