

THE PRAISED AND THE OBSCURED: EXAMINING THE MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF RURAL EDUCATION AID IN CHINA

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Abstract: Chinese rural are facing a huge impact from the market economy since the Reform and Opening Up. Accompanied by the severe gap in urban and rural economic development is the extreme lack of educational resources in underdeveloped rural China. With the introduction of Xi Jinping's "Rural Revitalization Strategy", rural education development issues attract continuous media and academic attention. Yet, the media representation of rural education aid (zhi jiao) has been rather neglected from the previous academic discussions. In the mediated society, how media represents this long-standing development measure to alleviate rural education problems is crucial to how the public understands and imagines the rural and its development. Critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis are applied to collected mainstream media content (2019-2021) to investigate how rural education aid is represented in China. Findings suggest that the media representation of rural education aid discursively constitutes the state development ideology. Advocating state policy of development overshadows aid practice in mainstream media representation. Furthermore, by setting up the binary between the rural and the urban, it reveals the huge development injustice between the rural and the urban. Yet it also reinforces the stereotype of rural China, thus justifies the status quo. Moreover, the media representation of different social actors reveals the unequal power relations in development. While the rural community is voiceless and denied agency, the entrepreneurs are given voice and commendable media representation. Such representation is problematic, and it has the risk of further marginalize the rural community.

Keywords: China rural education aid; media representation; media, communication and development; discourse

Introduction

Rural China

Rural China is important but sacrificed in China's long and unique social structure and cultural system, particularly, the dualistic structure system of urban and rural areas built in the rudimentary period of post-1949, China has brought this dual opposition to the extreme. The dual system is rooted in a more coercive socialist state strategy of relying on the peasantry to accumulate capital to achieve industrialization, and until the era of Reform and Opening Up, it strictly discriminated between urban and rural areas in terms of economy, politics, state welfare and culture (Chan and Wei, 2019). Essentially, the dual system constructs an unequal relationship between urban and rural areas, which divides China's population into the agricultural and non-agricultural populations, and is thickened and

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solidified by the hukou system codified in 1958. In other words, it is to divide urban and rural residents into two social groups with unequal development mechanisms and artificially establish clear barriers between urban and rural areas. Thus, this structure deprives peasantry of the right of freedom and equality of residence and migration given by the constitution, imprisons the two populations in the hierarchical administrative unit, triggering peasants' poor life with backward productivity, astonishing waste of peasantry resources, economic and social burdens (Jia, 2010).

China's modernization is based on industrialization and urbanization, but the dual system has stagnated urbanization for a long time. Until 1978, the implementation of Reform and Opening Up, to a large extent, promoted the process of urbanization, breaking the dual structure (Ding, 2008). Since this period, China's economy has entered the market-oriented mechanism and has become more open and active in manufacturing, export trade. This change needs cheap labor as support, so peasants flow to cities in the form of "temporary migrant labor" (Chan and Wei, 2019). But unfortunately, this has not fundamentally abolished the pattern of clear barriers and the hukou system.

Based on such historical background, the current situation of rural China is not optimistic with the biggest problem of the serious hollowing out of rural areas (Liu and Liu, 2010). The loss of the rural labor force leads to the aging, low age and poverty trend of the rural resident population. The flow of population and capital to cities, therefore, triggers the decline of the rural economy and the hollowing out of infrastructure and social services (Liu, 2010).

Rural Education

As mentioned above, the dual system makes it impossible for rural and urban areas to obtain the same treatment, so China's rural education is in a weak position in the national education system. Especially, the rural tax reform implemented in 2001 canceled the education funding-raising, which greatly reduced the rural education funds and had fatal impacts on rural education (Tan, 2003). To solve the dilemma of the lack of high-quality resources in rural areas, the policy of school closure and merger (Chedian Bingxiao) has been launched since 2001. It aims to improve the quality of rural education and narrow the gap between urban and rural education by eliminating small-scale and poor-quality rural schools and concentrating good education resources (Cai and Kong, 2014). Disappointingly, this policy's contribution to the betterment of Chinese rural education is rather limited. On the contrary, it aggravates the injustice of rural education, accelerates the decline of rural culture and the desolation of rural society.

Facing the shortage of rural educational resources, combined with the serious imbalance of regional economic development in China, relying solely on the government to increase educational funds cannot quickly improve the status quo and external developed aid is needed. Therefore, to alleviate the shortage of teachers, which is a vital and foremost part of education, the state has made it compulsory for urban primary and secondary school teachers to be promoted to senior teacher positions, and they should have the practice of teaching in rural primary and secondary schools for more than one year, which is the most extensive practice form of rural education aid (Zhijiao) at present (Yi and Pu, 2008). Generally speaking, rural education aid refers to the education and teaching management work that volunteers support schools in underdeveloped areas, and these volunteers normally have more comprehensive and higher-quality academic backgrounds. This

measure, which is based on the professional development of teachers and linked with the construction of rural teachers, is helpful to the construction of rural education (Yi and Pu, 2008).

State Policy

Proceed from China's actual conditions, the government has issued relevant development policies. In 2015, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued a decision on winning the fight against poverty¹. As an outline document, its overall goal is that all the poor counties can farewell to poverty, and solve the regional overall poverty by 2020. In 2018, the No. 1 central document formally implemented the Rural Revitalization (xiangcun zhenxing) Strategy², which made overall arrangements for comprehensively promoting rural revitalization. Because a complete victory in the fight against poverty through joint efforts from all ethnic groups has been achieved in 2020, 2021 is a milestone time to shift from poverty alleviation to pushing forward all-round rural vitalization³. The overall task is to comprehensively promote rural vitalization and accelerate agricultural and rural modernization.

It is worth mentioning that China is a Unified-ethnic country with 56 ethnic groups. Due to historical, geographical, cultural and other factors, the rural situation and educational shortage in ethnic minority areas are more severe. China adheres to the policy of equality and unity among all ethnic groups and promotes the common prosperity and development of all ethnic groups⁴. Therefore, there is no doubt that the development of ethnic minority areas is also applicable to the all-round Rural Revitalization Strategy and has become a highly valued part.

Under the guidance of national policies, to effectively help the development of rural education, rural education aid (zhi jiao) has been a very important social practice in China. It constantly has significant impacts on the revitalization of rural education. Simultaneously, the topic of rural education aid appears increasingly frequently in the media. China's official mainstream media is affiliated with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, which is the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China (Yuan, 2019), and timely delivers the party's discourse with precision. So, what kind of representation does rural education aid have in these mainstream media? What is the significance of understanding it for the development of China?

Research Question

This paper aims to answer:

How "rural education aid" (zhi jiao) is represented in mainstream media in China?

It can be separated into three detailed sub-research questions, namely, what are the relationships between the media representation of rural education aid and the state development discourse? What kind of discursive strategies are employed? How different social actors are represented?

¹ http://jtyst.jl.gov.cn/glj/ncgl_7609/ncgzze/201911/P020191120470487986318.pdf

² http://www.moa.gov.cn/xw/zwdt/201809/t20180926_6159028.htm

³ http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-02/21/content_5588098.htm

⁴ http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-07/14/content_335746.htm

Research Objectives

This paper tries to explore the important yet relatively overlooked media representation of rural education aid in China, aiming to contribute to the discussion of development, media and state affairs by providing empirical data from China.

Methodology

This research collected relevant data from China's official mainstream media including People's Daily, CPPCC DAILY, Guangming Daily, China Teacher Paper, China Ethnic News, Xinhua Daily, China Philanthropy Times and China Youth Daily from March 2019 to June 2021. According to the Report of the State Council on 2019⁵, as the fight against poverty has reached a critical stage, targeted poverty alleviation needs to be put forward to promote rural revitalization, which means that the whole fight has entered a new stage. Thus, the date of promulgation of this state report is the starting time of data collection for this study. 2021 is a new time to start to push forward all-round rural vitalization, so this study follows the latest situation.

By searching the China Core Newspapers Full-text Database with keywords of rural education aid (Zhijiao) and rural education support, there are 67 results in total, and with multiple and accurate selecting, 32 articles are retained as final analysis data. In order to answer the research question, thematic analysis (TA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) are the chosen methods.

Thematic analysis is a method to identify, organize and offer commonalities of a data set and attempt to understand the shared meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.57-58). TA can not only depict the semantic meaning but also exploring the latent meanings (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.60). Through the induction and deduction, it is easy to deeply explore the specific and different aspects of rural education aid.

To further investigate the discursive strategy and ideological implications in the media representation of rural education aid, CDA is an appropriated research method. CDA takes discourse practice as a kind of social and cultural practice to analyse and critically explore the construction of identities, social relations and knowledge systems by texts and discourses (Fairclough, 1995, p.30). Specifically, this study is suitable to use the three-dimensional discourse model proposed by Fairclough (1989), which is composed of text, discursive practice and social practice.

Admittedly, such method inevitably has the disadvantage of subjectivity (Gill, 1996), to actively reduce the defect, this research adopts the method of peer-review, considering comprehensively, CDA is still the appropriate research method for this qualitative study.

Literature Review

This research attempts to explore the media representation of rural education aid in China. It mainly uses three interrelated theoretical concepts to form an analytical framework, namely, media representation, ideology and discourse. Simultaneously, this research engages in the academic debates on media and development and rural education aid to lay the partial foundation of this research.

⁵ http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-03/05/content_5370671.htm?_zbs_baidu_bk

Media Representation

In this mediated society, the core of representing and reflecting the social reality is the media. Especially with the development of digital media, which creates new visibility liberated from the spatial and temporal properties (Thompson, 2005). Media representation increasingly affects people's cognition of the much, even including individual identity, society and the world (Brooks and Hébert, 2006).

In this vital field, media representation cannot be ignored. According to Stuart Hall (1997, p.17), representation refers to the process of using language to produce meaning, which is about the connection between concepts existing in either the "real" world or "fictional world" and language. The media representation discussed in this research is based on the "constructionist approach". In other words, it is not limited to discuss the production of meaning from the linguistic level, but more widely from historical or social context to search for how meaning is produced (Hall, 1997). Media representation, therefore, is always a kind of construction and re-presentation based on certain ideology or values and representational systems including conceptual systems of the cultural, linguistic and other by social actors, rather than a direct mirror reflection of social reality (Stuart, 1997; Branston and Stafford, 2010, p.106; van Leeuwen, 2008).

The power possessed by mass media is symbolic and ideological (Castells, 2007; Lukes, 2004). Media representation is such a process of exercising symbolic power (Stuart, 1997, p.179), which is unequal and usually depends on the mainstream structures. Thus, the representation of mainstream media tends to represent and reinforce the existing power relations within the society to naturalize the mainstream ideology (García-Jiménez, et al., 2014; Neary and Ringrow, 2018). This triggers the thinking of this research: what is the relationship between the media representation of rural education aid in China and mainstream ideology? What kind of power relation does the media representation reinforce?

Ideology and Discourse

In orthodox Marxism, the class has always been a core concern. Marx considers ideology as an important feature of all class-divided society (Van Dijk, 2006). In other words, ideology is a tool to rationalize the domination of the ruling class. Based on the inheritance and criticism of Marxism, Althusser connected ideology with "lived experience" (Purvis and Hunt, 1993, p.482). He argues ideology as "themes, concepts and representations through which men and women live, in an imaginary relation, their relation to their real conditions of existence", which is also agreed by Hall (Hall, 1980, p. 66). Furthermore, Althusser puts forward the famous Ideology and ideological state apparatuses, he distinguished between the (Repressive) State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatus, and the media belongs to the latter (Althusser, 2006, p.92). In detail, the ruling class uses the Ideological State Apparatus to integrate and develop itself, simultaneously, successfully imposes its own ideology on the exploited class, making it the ideology of the latter. With the development of media and its increasing importance, Stuart Hall (1984, p.11) clearly articulates that media representation can never exist outside ideology. In other words, media representation is subordinated to ideology, and this subsidiary relationship is moving in the process.

Here, the concept of discourse is also related to ideology. According to Hall's definition of discourse, that is, "sets of ready-made and preconstituted 'experiencings' displayed and arranged through language" (Hall, 1977, p.322). Discourse constitutes and articulates the interests of different social classes and groups, but the elements of discourse are always provisional, so that meaning cannot always be fully locked, thus ideology is the supplement and reference to this kind of inadequacy (Purvis and Hunt, 1993, p.482-493). Therefore, what kind of ideology and discourse are given to the media representation of rural education aid?

Media and Development

The media can provide fundamental services for the development of a country, especially for the development of developing countries (Silverstone, 1999). As mentioned above, media representation inflects people's knowledge, thoughts and discussion to a great extent, which means that the media has the function of keeping the public's attention on development (Hovland and Lumsdaine, 2017; van Krieken, 2019). Media has created the possibility for people to examine the society and development with a more rational and progressive vision and even can stimulate their aspiration for the nation and the state to expand the power of development (Lerner, 1958). This relatively early argument is still valuable in the context of this research, which leads to the following discussion about how the media has an impact on social actors and if they are represented through the media.

In addition, the media can deliver information to influential people (Schramm, 1964). In the process of development, information is a very essential element, so in connection with the above, although the media does not have the actual decision-making power, the media can offer information to decision-makers or relevant authorities. It is possible to provide more sufficient evidence for decision-makers to conduct comprehensive consideration to influence policies and expand the scope of political dialogue (Freedman, 2006). Such point can guide this paper to consider the developmental views or developmental decisions of influential authorities in the media representation.

Rural education aid in China

Most of the relevant literature focusing on rural education aid is based on pedagogy, sociology and so on, dialectically and critically analysing the current situation and constructive suggestions. Foremost, rural education plays a key role in the Rural Revitalization Strategy (Tan, 2019). Particularly, the laws and characteristics of education development in ethnic minority areas are intrinsically related to their natural and social ecological circumstance, so it is necessary to face up and solve the issues of backward education caused by historical, natural, economic and other factors (Zhu, 2013). Admittedly, rural education aid has greatly promoted the balanced allocation of educational resources and the development of educational quality (Li, 2018; Guo and Yan, 2009; Lv, 2010; Pei, 2020). Due to the influence of objective and competent factors, however, there are inevitably practical problems, such as the limitation of time and funds, oneness of form, lack of guarantee and supervision mechanism (Liu, 2018). These problems restrict the further development of supporting education. Consequently, how to strengthen the propaganda of policies, improve the mechanism of rural education aid, and rely on education to promote the sustainable development of rural areas are urgent issues to be tackled (Fu, 2018). Unfortunately, in now mediated era, there is little literature on rural education aid on media representation. This paper, therefore, will try to fill the gap in this important field and explore the media representation of rural education aid in China.

Through reviewing the previous relevant literature, this research will use media representation, ideology and discourse as theoretical support to analyze the media representation of rural education aid and its explicit or implied ideology or state discourse. Previous literature on rural education aid also helps to provide the current situation and understanding of rural education aid for this research. However, the media representation of rural education aid is a relatively new topic, which needs to be explored.

Findings and Analysis

State Discourse and Rural Education Aid

Through the analysis of the data collected in this research, it is essential to first admit that the relationship between media representation of rural education aid and state discourse and mainstream ideology is inseparable. Firstly, 54 percent of the selected data mentioned “poverty alleviation” “rural vitalization” and “pushing forward all-round rural vitalization”. Therefrom, through the media representation of rural education aid with high frequency and emphasis on the state development strategy, it is reasonable to say that the media does not have the power to determine people’s views on a certain topic, but the media can repeatedly mention a topic thus emphasizing the importance of the topic in the public mind (Severin and Tankard, 1997).

Based on the discussion of the Chinese academy, there are similar conclusions, for instance, Guo (2011, p.191) argues that media representation affects people’s judgment of the importance of social affairs by giving different degrees of significance to various topics. Therefore, frequent repetitions of these three state developmental terms, directly reflect the media’s high attention to the state discourse with rural education aid as the breakthrough point and instill its important significance to the audience.

Furthermore, according to Wareing (2004), it is reasonable to claim that the choice and use of words will strongly affect people’s perceptions. Therefore, when referring to these development strategies, the descriptors used together to present an optimistic attitude and express the affirmation and expectation of rural education and rural revitalization strategy. Taking “primary (shouyao)” “priority (youxian)” “joy occasion (xishi)” “milestone (lichengbei)” “happiness (xingfu)” “taking root (luodishenggen)” “comprehensive (quanmian)” “superior (youzhi)” “efficacious (youxiao)” as examples, they are all high-frequency words in the media representation with clear attitude. When such positive words are combined with the strategies, an atmosphere of highly affirming the value and effect of these strategies is created. Thus, this kind of lexical collocation aims to guide the audience to unconsciously form the psychology of being consistent with the attitude of the media representation of rural education aid to identify and recognize with the development ideology.

According to Fairclough (2000), the discourse of a successful leader often conveys some values, which can thicken the political ideology. Specifically, in China, the words of President Xi Jinping are the most powerful core of the mainstream ideology currently. The official media, as the mouthpiece of the party and the quotation of Xi Jinping’s words, clearly represent the authority of this official ideology and show strong political implications. For instance, the quotation of Xi Jinping’s speech from China Teacher Paper:

“It is necessary to ensure that all children in poor rural areas go to school and have a happy childhood. I hope to see such a group of rural teachers can root here to cultivate outstanding future generations for our country and our hometown. What you're doing is very meaningful” (Tan, 2020, p. 1).

The quotation means Xi Jinping’s affirmation of teachers’ work and his eagerly anticipation of teaching. Essentially, Xi Jinping is expressing his great attention to rural education, which is an extremely vital part of his youth education thought. Especially, the words of “to cultivate outstanding future generations for our country and our hometown” directly uncover the fundamental task of youth education thought, that is, to cultivate the builders and successors of the Socialist cause with Chinese characteristics (Zhongguo Tese Shehuizhuyi Shiye) and contribute wisdom and strength of building an All-Roundly Well-off Society (Xiaokang shehui) in China. In other words, this short quotation is the representation of Xi Jinping’s educational ideology.

Another example of Xi Jinping’s quotation is from People’s Daily:

“This year is a decisive year for building a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way and fighting against poverty. Teachers across the state use love and wisdom to block the intergenerational transmission of poverty” (Wan et al., 2020, p. 1).

Here, the media quotes Xi Jinping’s words to clearly pointed out the relationship between education and poverty alleviation and reiterates that education is a very important section in achieving the fight against poverty. To better understand the importance, it is necessary to mention several statistics provided by the People's Bank of China (2019), at present, the top 10% of Chinese households have 48% of the wealth of the whole society, while the last 20% only have 2.6% of the wealth of the whole society. This set of data shows the huge gap between the rich and the poor in China. In order to solve such a huge gap, Xi Jinping’s new developmental ideology articulates that it is significant to use “wisdom aid” to solve the problem of ideological poverty and adhere to the idea of educational equity, independence and sustainable development to eliminate poverty to ultimately improve people's livelihood and gradually achieve common prosperity. At a deeper level, the proposal and guarantee of the developmental ideology provide rationality for consolidating his power taking.

Another ideology represented in the media representation of rural education aid is about the ethnic policy of China. For the media representation in minority areas, family-style expression is often used to shape the ideology. “Be deeply attached to each other (xiang qin xiang ai)” “as dear to each other as members of one family (qin ru yi jia)” “help one another in defense work (shouwang xiangzhu)” are the most common words. In detail, in the article of the CPPCC DAILY (Guo, 2021), the term “Abba” (a Tibetan term for a father) is used to refer to the teacher of rural education aid, and the term “son” and “daughter” are used to refer to the children in the rural areas of Tibet. These kinds of friendly and nationalized family terms clearly express the meaning that all ethnic groups are family members of China big family, which is conducive to create empathy with the audience to construct national identity. This is because to promote integration and construct national identity, China has always used the metaphor of family, taking “fifty-six ethnic groups are one family” as the official discourse. Therefore, the use of Tibetan vocabulary and the appellation of family members is actually a participation in this construction.

Additionally, ethnic solidarity is also one of the main foci of media representation of rural education aid. The name of a student media club created in the process of rural education aid in Xinjiang mentioned in the China Ethnic News is "Pomegranate Seed New Media Club" with using Xi Jinping's words as annotation: "Every ethnic group is like a pomegranate seed tightly embraced together" (Er, 2021, p.1). This is a typical example to illustrate the relationship between different ethnic groups with vivid figurative rhetoric, as pomegranate seed implies solidarity in Chinese culture. Thus, this implies and relates to China's national policy of taking national unity as the core content and taking the common prosperity and development of all ethnic groups as the fundamental position. To fully show the policy, there is a second implication. As we mentioned above, due to the adverse natural environment, backward economic development and other factors, the education in ethnic minority areas is even worse than that in other rural areas. Therefore, such media representation not only shows ethnic solidarity, but also an attempt to mobilize ethnic minorities and responds to the overall developmental ideology.

Overall, the media representation directly and highly responds to China's poverty alleviation and rural revitalization strategy to inculcates the emphasis and recognition to the public. Meanwhile, Xi Jinping, as the core representative of the mainstream ideology, has been stressed many times in the media representation, which is fundamentally on the rationalization of his ruling. In addition, the media representation also embodies China's policies towards the ethnic minority to not only construct the national development ideology but also mobilize the ethnic minorities to achieve comprehensive development.

Setting the binary: harsh rural vs modern urban?

It is worth affirming the importance of the discursive strategy in meaning construction, and the most prominent feature of the discursive strategy in the media representation of rural education aid is setting a binary opposition, which spares no effort to highlight the backwardness of the rural and the advancement of the urban. In the media representation of rural education aid, rural areas and their education are constructed as harsh and backward images. According to the collected data, this construction is mainly divided into two parts, namely, the natural environment level and the social level. In terms of the former, many articles depict the ruthless and severe natural conditions in detail. For instance,

"There are more than 150 days of north wind above level eight every year, which often makes people unable to walk in Alashankou" (Wu, 2020, p1).

"Dry climate and high-altitude sickness make people very uncomfortable. Nosebleeds and insomnia are normal" (Gao & Wang, 2020, p.1).

"The teachers face problems such as inadequate clothing, housing, transportation etc. Sometimes they are threatened by disasters such as debris flow and earthquake" (Xinhua Daily, 2020, p.1).

These three extracts are all descriptions of the natural circumstance of the supported rural areas. Directly through the enumeration of bad and uninhabitable celestial phenomena and even frequent natural disasters, it makes people dread the living conditions of the rural located in such an

environment. This lays a negative tone for the first level construction of the rural media representation.

Secondly, the media representation of the social and educational conditions in rural areas is consistent with this inferiority. The descriptions of “continuous deep poverty”, “terribly shortage of educational resources”, “dilapidated campus”, “cracks and obvious peeling on the roof”, “serious hollowing”, “rather weak teacher resources” and “very difficult working and learning environment” are almost common in every collected article. It is reasonable to argue that the backwardness of the rural areas and the decline of education are represented, which almost cut off its connection with the positive image and deny the possibility of independent development. The subtext behind this is that the rationalization of the rural areas needs external aid to achieve modernization. Tracing back on the historical representation of China's rural background, the conclusion is that the media representation of the image of rural areas is stereotyped and labeled, closely associating with “poverty”, “uncivilized”, “marginalized” and “the vulnerable groups who need help, support and protection” (Wang, 2019). Likewise, the discursive strategy adopted by the media representation of rural education aid for the construction of rural areas is still the same style as the traditional negative representation of rural areas, at least, it is difficult to interpret the development from the description of the articles.

On the other hand, the discursive strategy for the urban areas or the side providing education aid in media representation is very different from the above, and modernization and advancement are the main characteristics. In order to more intuitively reflect the developed image of the urban, the media representation uses statistics for description. For example:

“Beijing has allocated a total of 2.098 billion yuan for education aid to Xinjiang, built and expanded 193 schools, with a construction scale of more than 2.6 million square meters” (He, 2021, p.1-2).

“3005 schools have been helped by Zhejiang province with launching ‘Internet plus compulsory education’” (Jiang, 2021, p.2).

Through these extracts, the construction of the urban includes abundant funds, advanced educational hardware facilities, developed Internet technology, and high-quality talents and teachers. Combined with the use of statistics, the first level is to directly explain the rich economy and resources of the urban. The second level is that statistics represent facts and is a scientific and rational expression, which itself participates in the construction of the image of urban scientific rationality. Such visible achievements and educational effects have jointly shaped the strength of urban modernization. So far, compared with the rural image construction above, the binary opposition has shown the obvious hierarchy. This reflects the condescending attitude of the urban areas as aid education aid providers, far surpassing that of rural areas.

Moreover, there is also a diachronic binary opposition in the data. Take the increase of enrollment rate as an example:

“The one-year enrollment rate of the school has increased from 48.2% last year to 62.1% this year with the aid from 33 Hubei teachers” (Wu, 2020, p.2).

Because of the rural education aid, the enrollment rate has increased by nearly 15% within one year, the change is dramatic. Linked to the policy of common prosperity put forward during Deng Xiaoping's era, which means to let some people and regions develop and become rich first to help other regions, and gradually realize common prosperity (Ding, 2008). Therefore, the dramatic change here is to justify such a policy, the facts have proved that the first rich urban areas can rapidly and effectively help the backward rural areas. It can be said that such media representation not only aims to build the social significance of urban education aid to rural areas through the actual effect, but also makes the overwhelming development of urban and the neglect of rural development take it for granted.

According to Hall, the discourse in media representation can be used to construct reality and dominate ideology in a biased way (Zhen, 2016). Therefore, in the media representation of rural education aid, the discursive strategy of setting two binary opposition, horizontal and vertical separately, is to support the status quo and maintain the state discourse. Relating to the historical background mentioned above, the establishment of the dualistic structure system of urban and rural areas places rural and urban areas in a completely unequal development position. Particularly, due to the long-term sacrifice of rural development, there is a vast gap with the economy and education of urban development progress. Although currently with the implementation of the poverty alleviation strategy and the rural revitalization, rural areas are developing and receiving mounting attention, the contrast between the poverty of the rural and the modernization of the urban in the media representation is the continuation of the dual system. Thus, the discursive strategy of binary opposition is essential to construct and reinforce the inequality between urban and rural development.

The core of the setting of binary opposition, as the most important discursive strategy in media representation of rural education aid, lies in the maintenance of the status quo. Consequently, the contrast between the backward rural areas and the developed urban areas denies the agency of rural independent development. This veils the achievements of rural self-development, but attributes too much credit to the urban aid. Admittedly, such media representation is problematic. It is easy to frustrate the enthusiasm of rural independent development, triggering excessive dependence and distort development.

Highly commented teachers, neglected children and deviated interest groups

Undoubtedly, the teachers who offer education aid to rural children and the children who receive the aid are the two key corresponding subjects in the social practice of rural education aid. Therefore, both will be analyzed in the following part. Besides, in the process of coming to the data, the media representation of interest groups as a class of social actors is interesting, which will be analyzed as well.

As defined above, the teachers offering education aid to the rural are social actors as well as volunteers from the urban. So at first, the media's representation of the teachers is highly praised to affirm their value without concealment. The descriptions such as "shoulder heavy responsibilities" "selfless dedication" "extraordinary significance" "noble ethics and responsibility" are full of the data. Admittedly, because teachers are the representatives of the urban, so these positive praises are also affirmations to the urban developed modernization. But more importantly, the teachers are also representatives of volunteers. The high affirmation given by the media is a kind of encouragement and

mobilization to appeal to put great attention to rural education and create a social atmosphere of selfless dedication and mutual help.

Furthermore, as key practitioners of rural education aid, teachers are usually faced with different difficulties such as teaching adaptation, heavy teaching tasks, etc., so in the media representation of rural education aid, the urban teachers are represented sufficiently and always in a gesture of dedication. Among all the collected data, there is a high proportion of articles that involve individual interviews of the teachers offering rural education aid. This is mainly to gathering the focuses on these teachers with their personal feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Interestingly, the contents of these interviews are coincidentally similar, for instance, a classic representation is as follows:

“There are more difficulties on the plateau than I thought. The high-altitude sickness makes me have to take three kinds of medicine every day. We also go to the hospital in groups to have an intravenous drip. But we still insist on returning to school until the end of the final class. I should protect the classes and children and create an environment for them to keep the advanced educational ideas and give them the possibility to connect the world” (Guo, 2021, p.2).

According to the extract, the difficulties encountered in the aid are initially expressed, and then the teachers overcome the difficulties with a sense of responsibility and love, taking the initiative to help the rural children. This way of representation combines thoughts and actions to construct a complete subject and reflects the persistence and spirit of utter devotion of the teachers. It not only fully shows the teacher's subjective initiative, but also creates a touching tone.

However, the other subjects corresponding to the teachers, namely, the aided rural children are completely missing in the media representation. On the whole, children's thoughts, feelings, their comments on the teachers and their changes are undoubtedly very vital, but the complete lack of attention to them is a worrying phenomenon, because it is negating children's agency. Looking through all the collected data, only very little mention of the peasants and was represented as “not paying attention to children's education” and “not very receptive to new things” (Pei, 2020, p.1). These words are negative, depicting the foolish and dull image of the peasants. Such underrepresentation and twist representation convey the prejudice that the peasants as a passive group, their insignificant influence can be ignored. This involves a strong sense of discrimination with the hint of weakening and marginalizing the status of the peasants. Again, as the reviewed theory points out that all participants should be represented and given a voice in the development, otherwise, such incomplete media representation may trigger the neglect of peasants' own needs and wishes, making all the education aid and changes have given forcing and condescending. Unfortunately, this may exacerbate the inequality between the urban and the rural, causing the existence of the rural subordinated to the urban.

While rural children and peasants are facing serious missing, as actors of civil society, commercial groups appear on the stage in the media representation of rural education aid in a high-profile form. Although it is common for interest groups to devote themselves to public welfare undertakings and occupy a position in media representation, the media representation in the collected data is problematic. Such interest groups are usually enterprises with strong financial strength. They pay attention to rural education aid and get attention from the media by constructing foundations or donations. For example,

“Ma Yun Public Welfare Foundation launched the “Ma Yun rural teacher plan”, which seeks 100 excellent rural teachers once a year and gives each person a total of 100000 yuan in cash assistance and professional development opportunities”; “The “Ma Yun rural student program” plans to invest at least 300 million yuan within 10 years to inject strength into rural education” (Pi, 2019, p.2-3).

This extract shows the generous financial support given by Ma Yun⁶ to aid rural education. It is undeniable that Ma Yun and other enterprisers have made contributions to the cause of supporting education, have very positive social impacts and appeal, and play a commendable role as a social model. However, in the following description, the sentence such as “Ma Yun pushed the atmosphere of the emblem ceremony to a climax with his passionate and thought-provoking speech” is worth analyzing (Huang, 2020). As the main dedicators, the attendance and contributions stating of the teachers offering education aid should be the climax and focus of the ceremony to maintain the emphasis on the rural education aid itself. But the media representation focuses more on Ma, which is kind of his promotion. Other examples, such as “supporting education is his lifelong mission” (Sui, 2019, p.1) and “Chenguang stationery will continue to adhere to and seek innovation with enthusiasm for public welfare undertakings and actively promote the sustainable development of the industry” (Zhu, 2021, p.1) focus on interest groups more than education. This presents a deviation of media representation, which biases to the promotion of the interest groups themselves and is conducive to the establishment of the image of the interest groups. In essence, there is more commerciality in the media representation, which shifts the focus, thus weakening the intensity of attention to rural education aid.

In sum, this section analyses the media representation of three different social actors in rural education aid. As for the teachers offering rural education aid, they are represented brightly and positively, which reflects the high recognition and praise from society. As the helped peasants, they have a great absence in media representation, which once again strengthens the inequality between urban and rural areas. Meanwhile, the representation of interest groups in the media inevitably shows commerciality, which makes the media representation deviate to a certain extent.

Conclusion

This paper examined how rural education aid is represented in Chinese mainstream media. In the media representation of rural education aid, the state discourse of development and ethnic policy is embodied ubiquitously. Firstly, the media emphasizes the importance of poverty alleviation and rural revitalization strategy through high-frequency direct reference, combined with overwhelming positive social significance to thicken the public’s recognition of these two state strategies. Similarly, the media quoted Xi Jinping’s words many times. As Xi Jinping’s ideas are the core of state ideology in China now. Such quotes, on the one hand, reflect Xi Jinping’s youth education and new developmental ideology, on the other hand, justify and maintain his governance. Additionally, media representation also considers China’s ethnic minority policy, which implies the promotion and mobilization of education development and ethnic consolidation.

⁶ Ma Yun (1964—), a famous Chinese entrepreneur, the founder and CEO of Alibaba Group

To further analyze the meaning construction, this research makes a detailed interpretation of discursive strategy. Setting the binary opposition between the rural and the urban is the main discursive strategy employed. It includes two kinds of opposition between the rural and the urban and before and after education aid. Firstly, the description of rural areas mainly constructs its image of decline and poverty, denies the agency of the rural community. Simultaneously, through the representation of developed urban economy and education, the media shapes the condescending of the urban and the positive significance of rural education aid. In terms of the diachronic binary opposition, it functions to justify the previous development policy, and sustain the priority development of the urban and the temporary sacrifice of rural development. Both binary oppositions reflect and reinforce the inequality, which is essentially the residue of the dual system.

Finally, media representation of different social actors reveals the unequal power relations between them. The media highly praises the teachers, constructs a complete subject with feelings and behaviors, and fully demonstrates their initiative and dedication. Admittedly, such media representation is considered as an attempt to mobilize more volunteers to participate in rural education aid. Yet, another group of vital participants in rural education aid, rural children are completely missing in the media representation. Only a few descriptions mention the peasants with a negative tone. Such missing once again denies the agency of the rural children and peasants. What is problematic is the media representation of entrepreneurs. Excessive praise risks the danger of shifting the focus. Thus, the rural community is further marginalized.

Meanwhile, this paper has certain limitations. As mentioned above, CDA has the problem of subjectivity. Besides, it lacks the angle of journalists and audience reception. A further study of investigating the audience reception from both rural communities and urban residents could test the interpretation of this paper. Another interesting further study could be investigating the view of mainstream media journalists to further reveal the complex relation between media representation and state ideology.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares that they have no conflict of interests.

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