

## Article

# A Discourse Analysis of 40 Years Rural Development in China

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**Abstract:** Since the reform and opening-up policy of 1978, rural areas in China have experienced significant changes in spatial, social, economic, and environmental development. In this research, we aim to explore the changes in the discourses on rural development over the past 40 years. This can help to understand how problems are framed and why certain strategies are adopted at different times. We employ a quantitative approach and analyze keywords from 32,657 Chinese publications on rural development from 1981 to 2020. From the results, we distinguish eight development paradigms, including “household responsibility system”, “rural commodity economy”, “social market economy”, “sustainable development”, “Sannong”, “building a new socialist countryside”, “beautiful countryside”, and “rural revitalization”. We also interpret the discursive shifts in three aspects, i.e., actors, places, and activities. We argue that the key characteristic of current rural development discourse is the duality, which emerges between agricultural and non-agricultural industries, economic growth and environmental conservation, urban and rural development, top-down and bottom-up approaches, and modernist and postmodernist discourses.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis; rural development; China



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## 1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, China has witnessed significant changes in its spatial, social, economic, and environmental development. The process of industrialization and urbanization has accelerated and had far-reaching impacts on both urban and rural development [1,2]. With the growing number of cities, the population distribution has changed dramatically. In 1978, 82% of the population lived in rural areas, but in 2020, the number has dropped to 36% [3]. It means that a large number of rural residents have become urban citizens [4]. Meanwhile, the built-up areas of cities and towns have expanded to be nearly four times larger, which indicates that rural areas have been constantly invaded by urban sprawl [5–7]. Besides the changes in population and land, rural areas have also undergone an industrial transformation over the past several decades. Although agriculture has always been the main industry, economic activities have become more diversified. Numerous enterprises engaged in the secondary and tertiary sectors of industry have been established and provided millions of job opportunities [8–10]. In the 1980s, the share of agricultural employment in rural areas was more than 80%, while in 2020, only about 60% of the rural labor workforce is still engaged in agriculture [11,12].

Along with these remarkable transformations, the understanding and interpretation of “rural development” have also changed. Both the political discourses produced by governments, and the academic and professional discourses shared by scholars and planners have evolved [13,14]. The objectives, strategies, and focal points of rural development in the 1980s are predictably different from those in recent years, in both policy-making and academic discussions. However, a comprehensive overview of the shifts of discourses on rural development in China has never been documented. In this research, we take a descriptive and analytical approach to derive the discursive shifts over the past 40 years. The aim is to identify the dominant discourse on rural development at different times

and to find out how discourses have changed in the complex socio-economic and political contexts. Discourse analysis is employed as a methodological tool to explore how concerns about and interests in rural development have evolved. It may not be possible to reveal what the reality of rural development is but it allows us to have a better understanding of how problems are identified and why certain strategies are adopted.

Discourse is a concept originating from linguistic studies. Potter and Wetherell describe discourses as “all forms of the spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds [15]”. Gregory widens the perspective on understanding discourse and points out that discourse “refers to all the ways in which we communicate with one another, to that vast network of signs, symbols, and practices, through which we make our world(s) meaningful to ourselves and others [16]”. Frouws follows this idea and defines discourse as “an organized set of social representations, the terms through which people understand, explain and articulate the complex social and physical environment in which they are immersed [17]”. From the viewpoint of Hajer, discourses are always closely linked to social practices, which refer to the cultural complexity of norms, disciplines, and rituals. Discourses are “produced and reproduced” through “an identifiable set of practices” and also have the potential to change them [18]. Fairclough suggests that discourses not only “represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective, imaginary, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied into projects to change the world in particular directions [19]”. Hence, we infer that discourses not only construct the contexts in which problems are identified but also influence the solution-seeking and policy-making processes. Another crucial feature of discourses is that they are dynamic. Foucault emphasizes that discourse is “a group of statements which provided a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment [20]”. Discourses might show some continuity over a period of time, but from a long-term point of view, there are constant changes in both the languages and the practices [21]. Due to the interaction of discourses and social practices, an analysis of discourses, and their variation and dynamics, can contribute to the interpretation of changes in socio-economic and political development.

Early research on rural discourses discusses the definition of rural and the interpretation of rurality. Murdoch and Pratt compare the discourses of modernism and postmodernism in rural studies and develop a new term, post-rural, for their study, which focuses on the power transition of actors [22]. Discourses on locality and social representation are introduced by Halfacree to define rural as both space and representing space [23]. Philo points out that the senses of non-academic people should also be taken into consideration when defining the concept of rural [24]. Pratt takes a critical investigation into the use of the terms rural and rurality, and argues that they should be understood in the context of social struggle and transformation [25]. Frouws analyzes the existing socio-political discourses on rural development in the Netherlands and distinguishes three types of discourses: the agriruralist discourse, the utilitarian discourse, and the hedonist discourse [17]. Hermans et al. provide an overview of the discourses on sustainable development in the Dutch agricultural sectors through an analysis of interviews. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with different stakeholders, including farmers, people from trade organizations and the food processing industry, and scientists [21].

Several studies demonstrate discourse analysis with a quantitative approach. Quantitative analysis has advantages over qualitative analysis in handling a large amount of data. Wang investigates the transformation of policies on migrant workers through critical discourse analysis. The research identifies the different social labels for migrant workers and examines the frequencies of these words, which appeared in the annual report on the work of the government (政府工作报告) from 2006 to 2016 [26]. Zhang et al. make a diachronic discursive analysis of the innovation and entrepreneurship policies concerning issues relating to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. The study finds the top keywords related to this topic in the No. 1 central documents (中央一号文件), which are promulgated by the central government and can be regarded as the guidelines of rural development in

China. The results show that the stakeholders, the focal points, and the political attitude towards innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas have evolved from 1982 to 2020 [27]. Most of the research applying a discourse analysis concentrates on one specific topic and there is a lack of an overall review of the discourses on rural development in China.

## 2. Materials and Methods

In this study, we suggest that discourses can be extracted from academic journal papers, which provide a wide range of discourse information. In addition to the way people choose words and use language, academic papers also represent the preferred epistemologies and axiologies, from which discourses can be derived. Two research methods were adopted for the discourse analysis. We first followed a quantitative approach for the text analysis, which covers the keywords from 32,657 Chinese journal articles relating to rural development since 1981. The software tool Jieba was applied to generate the top 25 keywords for each five-year development cycle. Secondly, we selected articles that contain the top 25 keywords and evaluated the introduction and full texts of the articles with the aim of seeking consistency in the use of words. The literature study makes it possible for those keywords to be contextualized in the historical background and provides the details and explanations for the formation of discourses.

### 2.1. Data Collection

To analyze the discursive shifts in rural development over the past 40 years, we needed to choose our data source in the first place. The database should include a large amount of discourse information. More importantly, it should be accessible throughout the time span, i.e., from 1978 to 2020, and preferably be updated frequently. We chose academic journal articles as the database for the following reasons. First, these articles are written by scholars from different fields of science, who observe, describe and analyze rural issues from diverse viewpoints. Their work concerns spatial, economic, social, and environmental development and involves numerous case studies in different regions of China. We believe that analyzing these articles, which combine both theoretical views and practical examples, can help us to have a comprehensive understanding of the rural development process. Second, academic journal articles pay close attention to changes in rural areas. Along with the changing contexts, scholars have been sharing new notions and concepts and having discussions and debates on rural issues. The topics and analytical perspectives they choose at different times reflects how “rural development” is constructed and evolves. With numerous papers published every year, the database is always being updated. It provides the possibility to observe the dynamics of discourses. In addition, most academic journal articles are available online. We can easily select the articles related to rural development and filter out the less relevant information. The articles can be regarded as datasets, which contain various information such as titles, abstracts, keywords, and references, and can be analyzed with software-supported programming techniques [28]. Among all the information, keywords are most suitable for a comparative discourse analysis because they are usually succinct and can capture the essence of articles. Considering the feature of the data, we argue that the text analysis with a quantitative approach should be applied to this study, which may help to identify the discourses efficiently, and find out the pattern of discursive shifts convincingly. Most of the academic journal articles concerning rural development in China are written by Chinese scholars in Chinese. We also used the search terms “rural development” combined with “China” in the database Web of Science, which includes publications mostly in English. However, the number of publications that can be found from before 2005 is less than 50 every year. Compared with Chinese publications, the number is limited and not adequate for quantitative analysis. Therefore, we performed the discourse analysis based on the Chinese articles.

We collected the information regarding publications from the platform of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI, <https://www.cnki.net/> (accessed on 15 January 2021)), which is a national project regarding database construction. One of the main

achievements of this project is the China Integrated Knowledge Resources System, which includes the major academic journals, doctoral dissertations, masters' theses, statistical yearbooks, patents, standards, and other publications in China. As the most comprehensive database of Chinese publications, it was chosen as the data source for our discourse analysis. Then we used the enclosed phrase "rural development"—translated as "nongcun fazhan" (农村发展) or "xiangcun fazhan" (乡村发展) in Chinese—as a search term in the titles, abstracts, and keywords of all journal articles from 1 January 1978 to 31 December 2020. As the search results showed that the number of publications was under ten from 1978 to 1980, which is not enough for quantitative analysis, we only included articles from 1981 in the dataset. The total number of articles reached 32,657.

## 2.2. Data Analysis

After these articles were collected, we split them into groups every five years. Five years can be regarded as a development cycle in China because of the five-year plans (五年规划), which are a series of political documents that guide social and economic development. The five-year plans have been issued by the central government since 1953. As China has undergone a transition from a planned economy (计划经济) to a market economy (市场经济) over the past several decades, the functions of the five-year plans have also evolved from controlling economic development and resource allocation to strategic planning in public affairs [29–31]. The government formulates new plans every five years to set new targets and initiate reforms. From 1981 to 2020, eight five-year plans have been promulgated: the 6th five-year plan from 1981 to 1985, the 7th five-year plan from 1986 to 1990, the 8th five-year plan from 1991 to 1995, the 9th five-year plan from 1996 to 2000, the 10th five-year plan from 2001 to 2005, the 11th five-year plan from 2006 to 2010, the 12th five-year plan from 2011 to 2015, and the 13th five-year plan from 2015 to 2020. Following the development plans, we also took five years as a cycle to analyze the discursive shifts. The 32,657 articles were divided into eight groups, including 388 from 1981 to 1985, 743 from 1986 to 1990, 898 from 1991 to 1995, 1314 from 1996 to 2000, 2013 from 2001 to 2005, 6414 from 2006 to 2010, 8002 from 2011 to 2015, and 12,885 from 2016 to 2020. We combined the keywords of these articles into eight text documents and then analyzed these documents with the software tool Jieba.

Jieba, a word for "stutter" in Chinese, is a Python module for text analysis. It is freely available via the website: <https://pypi.python.org/pypi/jieba/> (accessed on 15 May 2021). The version we used was released on 20 January 2020. The text analysis was achieved with the help of this software tool in two steps: Chinese word segmentation and keywords generation. Since the keywords given by authors are sometimes complex phrases, the first step is to segment those phrases into words. Both the phrases and the words are calculated as units for frequency analysis. After that, the TF-IDF, short for Term Frequency–Inverse Document Frequency, is employed as the algorithm to generate the top keywords in each text document. As a widely applied term-weighting scheme, it reflects the importance of a word to a document. Then we identified the top 25 keywords in every five-year development cycle. We chose 25 keywords, instead of the top 50 or 100, because they can basically cover the most representative words and are appropriate to be demonstrated in the table and interpreted in the results.

The keywords represent a wide variety of issues. To keep the results well-organized and compare the difference between each period, we classified the keywords into five categories: "development paradigms", "development focal points", "actors", "places", and "activities". The "development paradigms" refer to the concepts and approaches that serve as guidelines for rural development. They usually come from the national development policies and strategies, which are promulgated by the central government and implemented in all rural areas in China. The "development focal points" demonstrate the major concerns and interests of rural development at different times, and can be regarded as supplementary information on the development paradigms. They present, not only the objectives and problems, but also, the strategies and measures. In the category of "actors", the participants

in rural affairs, including individuals, enterprises, and other forms of collectives, are documented. Those actors promote rural development and play different roles in different periods. “Places” reflect how and where locations and spatial elements are addressed. Since the urbanization process has had a remarkable effect on rural areas, issues relating to rural development cannot be identified or processed within the boundary of rural areas. How the urban–rural relationship evolves is crucial to future rural development. “Activities” in this study refer to the industrial activities in rural areas. At the macro level, these activities define the function of rural areas in the region, while at the micro level, they influence the livelihoods of rural households. Some keywords are found in the top 25 but cannot be classified into these five categories, including “China”, “development”, “construction”, “strategy”, and “countermeasure”. They are not listed in the tables because they are all common words and will not affect further analysis.

### 3. Results

Tables 1 and 2 show the results of the quantitative text analysis, including the top 25 keywords and their rankings in each five-year development cycle. The development paradigms and focal points are contextualized following the Chinese development process in chronological order. We embedded the discourses in the socio-economic and political contexts of different periods and then interpreted the discursive shift in three additional aspects, i.e., actors, places, and activities.

**Table 1.** Top 25 keywords from 1981 to 2000.

	1981–1985	1986–1990	1991–1995	1996–2000
<b>Development paradigm</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility system (15)</li> <li>• Commodity economy (22)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commodity economy (9)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Market economy (9)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable (11)</li> <li>• Market economy (24)</li> </ul>
<b>Development focal points</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economy (4)</li> <li>• Diversified economy (8)</li> <li>• Fiscal management (11)</li> <li>• Mode of business operation (14)</li> <li>• Economic system (17)</li> <li>• Economic benefits (20)</li> <li>• Ideology (23)</li> <li>• Industrial structure (25)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economy (3)</li> <li>• Fiscal management (8)</li> <li>• Economic system (10)</li> <li>• Productivity (19)</li> <li>• Industry (20)</li> <li>• Mode of production (22)</li> <li>• Gross output value (23)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic system (6)</li> <li>• Economy (7)</li> <li>• Fiscal management (14)</li> <li>• Socialist (18)</li> <li>• Gross output value (19)</li> <li>• Two-tier operating system (21)</li> <li>• Industry (23)</li> <li>• Land (25)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economy (6)</li> <li>• Industrialization (9)</li> <li>• Economic system (13)</li> <li>• Fiscal management (20)</li> <li>• Management (22)</li> <li>• Socialist (23)</li> </ul>
<b>Actors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laborers (3)</li> <li>• Specialized households (5)</li> <li>• Farmers (6)</li> <li>• Township and village enterprises (TVEs) (9)</li> <li>• Commune and brigade enterprises (CBEs) (19)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laborers (4)</li> <li>• TVEs (5)</li> <li>• farmers (6)</li> <li>• CBEs (7)</li> <li>• Labor force (13)</li> <li>• Enterprises (18)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laborers (3)</li> <li>• Farmers (4)</li> <li>• TVEs (5)</li> <li>• CBEs (8)</li> <li>• Labor force (16)</li> <li>• Enterprises (22)</li> <li>• Surplus labor force (24)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farmers (3)</li> <li>• Laborers (4)</li> <li>• TVEs (5)</li> <li>• CBEs (8)</li> <li>• Enterprises (14)</li> <li>• Labor force (19)</li> </ul>
<b>Places</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural areas [nongcun (1)/xiangcun (21)]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural areas [nongcun (1)/xiangcun (11)]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural areas [nongcun (1)/xiangcun (10)]</li> <li>• Urbanization [chengshihua (17)]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural areas [nongcun (1)/xiangcun (10)]</li> <li>• Urbanization [chengshihua (18)]</li> <li>• Small towns (23)</li> <li>• Towns (25)</li> </ul>

Table 1. Cont.

	1981–1985	1986–1990	1991–1995	1996–2000
Activities	• Agriculture (2)	• Agriculture (2)	• Agriculture (2)	• Agriculture (2)
	• Commodity production (7)	• Secondary industry (12)	• Secondary industry (11)	• Agricultural products (12)
	• Production (13)	• Grain (14)	• Agricultural products (15)	• Secondary industry (17)
	• Grain (14)	• Agricultural products (16)		

Table 2. Top 25 keywords from 2001 to 2020.

	2001–2005	2006–2010	2011–2015	2016–2020
Development paradigm	• Sannong (7)	• New countryside (2)	• New countryside (3)	• Rural revitalization (1)
	• Sustainable (24)	• Sannong (20)	• Sannong (20)	• New countryside (9)
Development focal points	• Economy (6)	• Economy (10)	• New type (13)	• Structural reform (8)
	• Increase income (9)	• Overall planning (11)	• Economy (14)	• Supply (13)
	• Reform (12)	• Socialist (12)	• Land (15)	• Poverty alleviation (14)
	• Industrialization (14)	• Reform (14)	• Management (17)	• Integration (16)
	• Rural taxes (17)	• System (15)	• Land transfer (18)	• Industry (18)
	• Farmers' income (18)	• Increase income (17)	• Innovation (21)	• Governance (19)
	• Land (19)	• Land (18)	• Agricultural machinery (22)	• New type (21)
	• Fiscal management (21)	• Fiscal (22)	• Reform (23)	• Reform (23)
		• Finance (24)	• Service (24)	
		• Agricultural machinery (25)	• System (25)	
Actors	• Farmers (3)	• Farmers (5)	• Farmers (4)	• Farmers (17)
	• Laborers (4)	• Laborers (8)	• Cooperatives (8)	• Cooperatives (22)
	• Labor force (13)	• Cooperatives (13)	• Laborers (9)	
	• Villagers (16)	• Migrant workers (21)		
	• Organizations (23)			
Places	• Rural areas [nongcun (1)/ xiangcun (8)]	• Rural areas [nongcun (1)/ xiangcun (9)]	• Rural areas [nongcun (1)/ xiangcun (7)]	• Rural areas [nongcun (2)/ xiangcun (3)]
	• Urban–rural (11)	• Urban–rural (7)	• Urban–rural (10)	• Urban–rural (11)
	• Urbanization [chengshihua (23)/ chengzhenhua (25)]		• Urbanization [chengzhenhua (16)]	
Activities	• Agriculture (2)	• Agriculture (3)	• Agriculture (2)	• Agriculture (4)
	• Agricultural products (15)	• Agricultural products (19)	• Modern agriculture (12)	• Tourism (15)
			• Agricultural products (19)	• Agricultural products (25)

### 3.1. Development Paradigms and Focal Points

As mentioned above, development paradigms are the guidelines of rural development. Together with the development focal points, they build the framework from which policies are formulated, strategies are made, and measures are taken. Eight development paradigms are distinguished, in line with the Chinese rural development policies from 1981 to 2020. It can be seen from the tables that paradigms coexist in some periods and change over time.



### 3.1.1. Household Responsibility System

The first development paradigm in the cycle of 1981–1985 was the “responsibility system”, i.e., “household responsibility system” (家庭联产承包责任制), which marked the start of the reform in rural land and the economic system. The ten years of chaos from 1966 to 1976 had slowed down the economic growth in China. Concerning rural development, improving agricultural productivity became an urgent task at both the national and local levels. During the Maoist era, agricultural production was organized by the rural collectives, i.e., the production team who controlled the land use, the sales of products, and the distribution of income. This system not only led to massive costs for labor-management but also limited the freedom and enthusiasm for production by individuals [32]. Since 1978, a series of innovative strategies were encouraged and implemented following the reform and opening-up policy. The idea of the household responsibility system came from an attempt of a group of farmers who contracted farmland from the collective and took responsibility for their management and revenues. It proved to be successful through the drastically increased crop yield and was promoted by the central government in the 6th five-year plan (1981–1985). Since households were given the rights to arrange their production activities and sell the surplus products at the markets, the gross output value of agriculture and the income of rural households increased steadily in the 1980s [33]. The household responsibility system changed the agricultural production system, the land tenure system, and the social structure in rural areas by rebuilding the relationship between the state, the rural collectives, and rural households [34,35], and it is still the basic economic system in rural China now.

### 3.1.2. Rural Commodity Economy

The development paradigm “commodity economy” (商品经济) appeared in both 1981–1985 and 1986–1990, and moved up from 22nd to 9th in the rankings. As shown in Table 1, almost all of the development focal points in the 1980s were related to the rural economy. It could be inferred that economic reform was the main subject of rural development in this period. For years, rural China was dominated by the self-sufficient agricultural economy, and until the early 1980s, the commercial activities were still largely restricted. In 1982, the proportion of farm products that entered the market was only about 15%, which could hardly meet the food demands of the growing urban population [36]. Since agricultural productivity was enhanced, along with the household responsibility system, a new economic system that could reorganize the distribution of surplus products was required. The rural commodity economy was then widely discussed, which distinguished itself from the natural economy by the larger scale of production, exchanges, and sale of goods [37]. The development focal points from 1981 to 1990 also showed the characteristics of the commodity economy. When farmers regarded themselves as commodity producers, they began to focus on “economic benefits” (经济效益) and change the “mode of business operation” (经营方式) and the “mode of production” (生产方式). As a result, the “diversified economy” (多种经营) was achieved and the professional division of labor was promoted. Millions of “specialized households” (专业户) appeared, who engaged in certain business projects and took the lead in improving production technology. Although the central government emphasized that the “commodity economy” was still under the structure of the socialist planned economy, many scholars pointed out that it was essentially the transitional stage to the “market economy” [38].

### 3.1.3. Socialist Market Economy

The “market economy” became the development paradigm in the cycle of 1991–1995. Its ranking fell from 9th to 24th in 1996–2000. In the Chinese context, the word “market economy” was often used in conjunction with the adjective “socialist”, which also appeared on the top 25 list from 1991 to 2000. Since 1949, China had implemented a planned economy, which meant that the government proposed the objectives of economic development and arranged the major economic activities. As the rural commodity economy prospered and

the free market expanded, the system of the planned economy could no longer meet the needs of rural development [38]. In the late 1980s, it was widely recognized that the factors of production should not be allocated according to administrative orders and the initiative of individuals and enterprises should no longer be restricted [39]. Since the 1990s, adopting the “socialist market economy” (社会主义市场经济) became the development approach in rural areas. “Market economy” meant that the economic activities should be guided by the relationship of supply and demand in the market. “Socialist” indicated that the role of the government’s macro-control remained crucial, and public ownership of major means of production, e.g., land and other natural resources, remained intact [40]. Guided by the principle of the socialist market economy, diversified economic activities were encouraged in rural areas [41]. As a result, the development of the Commune and Brigade enterprises (CBEs 社队企业), and the Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs 乡镇企业), which began in the 1980s, reached their peak in the 1990s. These enterprises were engaged not only in the business related to agricultural production and sales, but also the secondary sector of industry, and thus promoted the rural industrial transformation [42]. In both the 7th (1986–1990) and 8th (1991–1995) five-year plans, the central government emphasized the importance of TVEs in the rural economy and regarded TVEs as an instrument to achieve rural prosperity.

#### 3.1.4. Sustainable Development

In the 1980s, the primary goal of rural development was economic recovery and reform. To increase the agricultural output, chemical fertilizers and pesticides had been overused, which brought many negative effects on the agro-ecological environment, such as land degradation and groundwater contamination. The quality of agricultural products was also affected and food safety could not be guaranteed [43]. As the secondary sector of industry boomed in rural areas, the excessive exploitation of natural resources and the pollution caused by the rural enterprises had presented an enormous threat to the rural environment [44]. Since the second half of the 1990s, the rural development discourse started to embrace a discussion on how to coordinate the relationship between economic development, resource management, and environmental protection [45]. Learning from the development experiences of other countries, the central government formulated China’s Agenda 21 after the UN conference on the environment and development in 1992. Since then, sustainable development (可持续发展) had been recognized as an epoch-making strategy in China. “Sustainable” was identified as the paradigm of rural development in the cycle of 1996–2000 and 2001–2005. It was also written in every five-year plan since 2001. Based on its concept, a series of measures were taken, one of which was the project “returning farmland to forest and grassland” (退耕还林还草). The aim of this project was to prevent further environmental degradation and reduce the occurrence of natural disasters such as floods and sandstorms. A large amount of farmland that was threatened by soil erosion and desertification had been converted to forest or grasslands since 1999 [46]. Compared with the former paradigms, sustainable development showed a transformation in the rural development discourse. Though the rural economy still remained the focus of development, the long-term plan was to achieve the balance between economic growth and environmental conservation.

#### 3.1.5. Sannong/Issues Relating to Agriculture, Rural Areas, and Farmers

“Sannong” (三农) is a Chinese acronym that means issues relating to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers, i.e., three core elements of rural development. It appeared in the cycle of 2001–2005 and remained the development paradigm in all of the subsequent cycles. Since the implementation of the household responsibility system, the household became the basic unit of agricultural production, and farmland was divided into small pieces for every household. The small-scale fields limited the increase in agricultural productivity. Farmers’ income had hardly increased for many years [47,48]. Meanwhile, the secondary and tertiary industries experienced rapid growth in the 1990s, and a massive transfer



of rural labor occurred from the agricultural sector to the non-agricultural sector. More and more rural people preferred to work in enterprises or find jobs in cities and towns to make more money. As a result, the share of agricultural employment and the inputs in agriculture had decreased [4]. To ensure the food security of China, the focal points of rural development in the 2000s were drawn to agricultural issues. A series of policies aiming to strengthen agriculture, enrich rural areas, and benefit farmers were implemented. One of the primary goals was to increase farmers' income. In order to alleviate the burden on farmers, the reform of rural taxes was promoted in 2003. Three years later, the agricultural tax which had existed in China for more than 2600 years was eventually abolished [49]. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, "Sannong" is the longest standing development paradigm and thus could be regarded as the fundamental guideline for rural development after 2000. It implies that agricultural production and rural livelihoods remain the major concerns of rural development in both political and academic fields over the past 20 years.

### 3.1.6. Building a New Socialist Countryside

Urban and rural areas in China developed differently in the 1990s. Urban areas had experienced rapid expansion and prosperity, whilst most of the rural areas had witnessed economic stagnation [50]. With the growing urban–rural disparity, the images of the urban and rural areas in people's minds had changed. When talking about the urban, people might tend to use words such as modern, dynamic, and innovative, while rural was more likely to be related to adjectives such as underdeveloped, uncivilized, or changeless [51]. To reconstruct the image of rural areas, the central government promulgated a new policy "building a new socialist countryside" (建设社会主义新农村) in 2006. Since then, "new countryside" (新农村) entered the list of top 25 keywords and became the development paradigm. "Building a new socialist countryside" required a series of reforms and innovations. The aims were to achieve the new type of agriculture, the new form of business organizations, the new appearance of villages, and the new mode of administration [52]. Various narratives were created such as "new farmers" (新型农民) and "new type of urbanization" (新型城镇化). From the results of our analysis, "new countryside" remained the development paradigm from 2006 to 2020. It has also appeared in every five-year plan since 2006. "Building a new socialist countryside" was a guideline regarding different aspects of rural development and a concept that was constantly expanding in content [53,54]. It could be regarded as a milestone in rural development that indicated the beginning of the comprehensive rural reform. The following development paradigms such as "beautiful countryside" (美丽乡村) and "rural revitalization" (乡村振兴) were formulated on the basis of it.

### 3.1.7. Beautiful Countryside

"Beautiful countryside" appeared in the cycle of 2016–2020 and was a supplementary instruction to the approach of "building a new socialist countryside". As there was no unified definition of "beautiful", it could be understood from various perspectives by different interpreters, such as local governments, scholars, and rural people [55]. Some understood it from the perspective of environmental conservation and pointed out that the green industry that preserved the ecosystem services should be promoted [56]. Some suggested that the infrastructure construction, which solved problems such as waste disposal and sewage treatment, was essential for building clean and tidy villages [57]. Others argued that the unique and traditional culture in rural areas was the most beautiful thing that needed to be preserved, upon which rural tourism could be well developed [58]. However, the implementation of this strategy had brought about several problems. Since the criteria of village development included beautiful, clean, and tidy, some local governments concentrated on dismantling all the old residential buildings and forced farmers to move into new houses. It led to an increase in the government's financial burden and also neglected people's needs and wills [59]. Moreover, after reconstruction and renovation, many villages lost their original character and the landscapes became similar to one another [60]. Although

such cases are rare, they still reveal a potential problem of the top-down administrative system in China. In general, the guideline for rural development is formulated by the central government and then interpreted and implemented by local governments. When the paradigm is misinterpreted, rural development could be led to the opposite result.

### 3.1.8. Rural Revitalization

Rural areas in China had experienced prosperity in the early 1980s. However, the stagnation in the 1990s had widened the gap between urban and rural areas [50]. Although rural development had received great support over the last two decades, urban–rural inequality still remained a problem. Therefore, revitalizing rural areas was proposed as a new policy and became the current development paradigm [61]. As shown in Table 2, “rural revitalization” was the most frequently used keyword in the cycle of 2016–2020. It was not only a continuation of the “new countryside” strategy, but also an upgrade. In the 14th five-year plan (2021–2025), “rural revitalization” has replaced “new countryside” and becomes the new discourse on rural development. The objectives of rural revitalization could be summarized as “industry prosperity, ecological livability, civilized rural customs, effective governance, and an affluent life” (产业兴旺, 生态宜居, 乡风文明, 治理有效, 生活富裕) [62]. This paradigm required comprehensive progress in rural areas in various aspects, including industrial upgrading, environmental conservation, social harmony, and good governance. It also provided new approaches to deal with the problems of “Sannong”. The aim was to “make agriculture a promising industry, make farming an attractive profession, and make the countryside a beautiful place for living and working” [63]. One of the urgent tasks was poverty alleviation, which included a series of measures such as investing in infrastructure construction, enhancing social welfare, improving education and the health care system, etc., [62]. It is suggested that strategies focusing on providing job opportunities and increasing rural incomes should be strongly promoted to attract young people to work and live in rural areas. Only when the younger generations are willing to remain in rural areas, revitalization can be finally achieved [61].

From the analysis of paradigms, we can see that the discourses on rural development have evolved over the past 40 years. The discursive shifts reflect not only the changing social, economic, and environmental contexts in rural areas, but also the development priorities that are given by the government, which are reflected in the five-years plans. The previous development paradigms such as a “household responsibility system”, “rural commodity economy”, and “socialist market economy”, focused mainly on economic development. Since the late 1990s, environmental conservation in rural areas had been given growing attention under the guidance of “sustainable development”. “Sannong” showed the concern regarding rural people’s livelihoods. “Building a new countryside” required the reconstruction of the rural image. “Beautiful countryside” implied higher demands on environmental improvement and cultural preservation. “Rural revitalization” marked the reorientation of rural development in various aspects. Although the development paradigms were mainly proposed and promoted by the central government in China, they could also provide evidence of the problems that rural people were faced with. To have a comprehensive understanding of the rural development discourse, we analyze the keywords relating to actors, places, and activities.

### 3.2. Actors

“Actors” include all the participants in rural development. Some of the actors stay on the list over all the cycles, others only appear for a short period of time. The changes in the rankings indicate the changes of their roles.

“Laborers” (劳动者) refers to all the rural people that engage in the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors of industry. They are the main body of rural development and remained on the list of top 25 keywords from 1981 to 2015. Among all the laborers, “farmers” (农民) can be identified as the most important actor. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, “farmers” were on the list in all cycles and had occupied first place in the category of actors since

1995. There is no doubt that farmers play a vital role in rural development and ensure food security for China. However, the way they work and live has changed over the past 40 years. The “specialized households” appeared in the cycle of 1981–1985. They are farmers who specialize in certain agricultural production activities, such as flower growers, beekeepers, and pig farmers. In order to achieve better economic benefits, they are willing to adopt advanced production tools and techniques and thus play a leading role in the promotion of agricultural modernization [64]. Along with the urbanization process, a large number of farmers have become “migrant workers” (农民工). This keyword entered the list of actors in the cycle of 2006–2010. Migrant workers are rural residents, who engage in non-agricultural industries or work in urban areas. Some of them leave rural areas because they lost their farmland during the land requisition, which is an administrative process where the land is needed for infrastructure construction or urban expansion. Others move to cities seasonally or permanently to seek better job opportunities and earn more money [65,66]. The number of migrant workers has rapidly increased during the past several decades and reached 285 million in 2020 [12]. While their work has boosted economic prosperity and urban development, the rural areas they leave behind are decaying gradually. In some villages, only the elderly and the children stay, lacking proper care and attention. Numerous rural residential buildings become vacant or abandoned. This phenomenon is called village hollowing and has spread out through rural areas, especially in the less developed regions [13,67]. With the promotion of the “building a new socialist countryside” strategy, the concept of “new farmers” has been proposed. “New farmers” refer to the practitioners of modern agriculture, who are equipped with professional skills and management knowledge. The difference between a new farmer and a traditional farmer is that the former chooses farmer as an occupation actively, whilst the latter is a passively-accepted identity. Several measures are taken to train the new farmers, aiming to change the stereotype of farmers and make it an attractive profession to the young generation [68].

Enterprises appeared as important actors from 1980 to 2000. Commune and brigade enterprises (CBEs), which changed their name to township and village enterprises (TVEs) after 1984, refer to the collective, cooperative and individual enterprises organized by rural residents. Receiving full support from the Chinese government, they experienced fast growth in rural areas in the 1980s and 1990s. Some of the enterprises produce fertilizers, pesticides, and agricultural machinery, and thus promote the modernization of agriculture [69]. Some engage in the secondary sector of industry and contribute to the industrial transformation in rural areas. The TVEs have provided a large number of job opportunities for rural residents and improved household income [70].

Another significant actor is the “cooperatives” (合作社). Rural cooperatives were on the list from 2005 to 2020. They are economic organizations established by farmers to pool resources in certain fields. They are voluntarily associated and democratically managed. Members can include farmers, enterprises, and other social groups. There are different types of rural cooperatives, such as supply and marketing cooperatives, and rural credit cooperatives. They provide support and assistance to farmers in various aspects, including production, processing, and the sale of agricultural products. In 2007, a law on farmers’ professional cooperatives was officially promulgated and implemented. Since then, the number of rural cooperatives has rapidly increased and the initiative and creativity of farmers has been inspired [71,72].

### 3.3. Places

The concepts of rural and urban appear to be opposite to each other, but rural and urban development are closely related. For a long time, rural areas have supported the development of urban areas. Agriculture has been the basis for the development of other industries. In the 1980s, one of the main functions of rural areas was to provide food and labor for urban development. Only when agricultural productivity had been improved and surplus agricultural products had accumulated, cities had the opportunity

to grow and develop, and a growing number of people could engage in the secondary and tertiary industries. It is argued that the prosperity of rural areas is a prerequisite for urbanization [73].

Over the past several decades, the urbanization process in China has been unprecedented in scale and speed. The number of cities in China has risen from 193 in 1978 to 687 in 2020, and the urban population in 2020 accounted for 64% of the total population, up from 18% in 1978 [12]. “Urbanization” has become a key topic and remained on the list of top 25 keywords since 1991. However, the accelerated urbanization process has raised serious socio-economic and environmental issues in rural areas. As mentioned above, a large number of migrant workers have left their villages to work in cities. Rural areas are faced with problems such as lack of a labor force, population aging, and village hollowing. The urbanization process also leads to drastic changes in land use. Rapid expansion in urban construction land means a constant requisition of rural land. The arable land in rural areas has been shrinking and numerous farmers have no land to farm [74].

Along with the long-time urban-biased development strategies, food, labor force, and other resources have continuously flowed from rural to urban areas, aggravating the imbalance between the two areas. The regional disparity and the income gap between rural and urban residents have become serious problems [75]. There is a growing realization that these problems cannot be solved within the rural or urban areas. The development should be planned and achieved at the regional level, and the interaction of urban and rural areas should also be taken into consideration. As a result, the word “urban–rural” (城乡) has entered the list since 2001. The planning institutions in China also changed the name of their duty from “urban planning” (城市规划) to “urban–rural planning” (城乡规划) in 2007. Under the guidance of the national strategy “urban–rural integration” (城乡一体化), measures are taken to reduce the adverse effects caused by the traditional urban–rural duality [76]. The relationship of urban and rural is previously described, as the rural feeds the urban. Now it is time to consider how the urban can feed the rural in reverse. The critical issue in urban–rural integration is to identify the function of cities and towns in supporting rural development [77].

As demonstrated in brackets in Tables 1 and 2, “urbanization” is described using two different Chinese words. In the 1980s, the process was named “chengshihua” (城市化) which means “to become cities”. Since the 2000s, the word has changed to “chengzhenhua” (城镇化), which means “to become cities and towns”. The role of “small towns” has been widely discussed and considered to be crucial for the future of rural development [78]. Since the urban carrying capacities of most metropolis and big cities in China has almost been reached, the scales of cities should be controlled. The “new type of urbanization” should be focused on the development of small towns. It was argued that if small towns could provide public services and job opportunities for the surplus labor in a rural area, a coordinated urban–rural development would be achieved [79].

It is worth noting that both of the Chinese words “nongcun” (农村) and “xiangcun” (乡村) can be translated as “rural areas”. However, the subtle difference between these two words in the Chinese context should be clarified. The literal meaning of “nongcun” is “the agricultural village”, which emphasizes the dominance of agricultural activities in this area. In contrast, “xiangcun” is a geographic concept, which means the areas outside of the cities. In recent years, there is a growing trend to use “xiangcun” instead of “nongcun”. For example, in the development paradigm “beautiful countryside” and “rural revitalization”, the word “xiangcun” is chosen to refer to rural areas. It implies that rural areas should not be regarded as a place that only produces agricultural products. Although issues relating to agriculture are still the main concerns for rural development, more and more diverse economic activities are carried out in rural areas.

### 3.4. Activities

The category “activities” contains keywords related to rural industries. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, “agriculture” (农业) and “agricultural products” (农产品) are the most

frequently occurring words. It can be inferred that agriculture has always been the predominant industry in rural areas. But the focus of agricultural development has changed over the past several decades.

In the 1980s, the major task of rural areas was to provide sufficient food for the people in the whole country. The increase in food production should keep up with the demands of the growing population. “Grain” (粮食) was a concerning issue because grain output was a crucial indicator related to national food security [74]. To enhance the agricultural productivity and gross output value was the focus of rural development before 1995. “Commodity production” (商品生产) is another requirement for agricultural production. Guided by the “rural commodity economy” policy, when self-sufficiency was almost achieved, agricultural products were required to meet the needs of the markets. The commodity products resulted in more benefits for farmers and promoted the specialization and commercialization of the agricultural industry [36,37]. Along with the “building a new socialist countryside” policy, the concept of “modern agriculture” (现代农业) is proposed to achieve the transformation and upgrading of the agricultural industry. Traditional agriculture is characterized by household business, small-scale production, and limited efficiency. By contrast, modern agriculture aims for specialized, well-organized, and commercialized mass production. It emphasizes the use of advanced science and technology and the application of modern management methods. Various organizations established by farmers such as specialized cooperatives and joint-stock companies are encouraged to achieve the optimal use of resources [80]. In the cycle of 2016–2020, one of the development focal points was to promote the “supply-side structural reform” (供给侧结构性改革) in agriculture, which aimed at improving the effectiveness and quality of agricultural supply by focusing on the changes in market demand. It could also be considered as one of the approaches to achieve the modernization of agriculture [81].

From 1986 to 2000, the “secondary industry” (工业) has experienced a booming development and was on the list of activities. Since rural areas account for a large part of the land and are generally rich in a variety of natural resources, industries such as mining, manufacturing, and energy production and supply have great potential. As mentioned above, TVEs had rapidly spread during this period. The development of secondary industry was proved to be an effective way to revitalize the rural economy. However, numerous TVEs were criticized for the excessive use of resources and polluting the environment. Featuring small-scale and scattered spatial distribution, they also caused inefficiency in land use. As the features of these enterprises are sometimes against the current environmentally-friendly development paradigm, the transformation and upgrading of the TVEs became an urgent issue [44].

The activities in rural areas have shown a trend towards diversification. In recent years, rural “tourism” (旅游) has gained popularity in China. Diverse types of villages can benefit from it. Famous tourist attractions bring opportunities for the villages nearby. They are suitable for the development of tertiary industries such as accommodation and catering. Some villages are attractive because of their architectural relics or cultural heritage and rural development should focus on the preservation of these resources. Other villages close to the cities have the advantages in custom sources and transportation and are encouraged to build modern resorts for urban residents to enjoy the weekends. Compared to other industries, tourism appears to do less harm to the rural environment. It has also created millions of job opportunities and benefited numerous rural households. Thus, it is considered a feasible approach for current rural development [82,83].

#### 4. Discussion

The shifts of discourses indicate various changes, which have taken place not only in the actors and activities in rural areas, but also in the perceived conceptualizations of rural development. During this transitional period, diverse perspectives coexist, different demands emerge, and conflicts occur. We argue that duality is a prominent feature of the current discourse on rural development, which surfaces between agricultural



and non-agricultural industries, economic growth and environmental conservation, urban and rural development, top-down and bottom-up approaches, and modernist and postmodernist discourses.

#### *4.1. Agricultural and Non-Agricultural Industries*

China is regarded as a country with a large population and relatively inadequate farmland. Achieving domestic self-sufficiency in food has always been the primary task of national development strategies. However, the shrinkage of arable land has accelerated and might pose a threat to China's food security [74]. On the one hand, the central government has implemented a series of strict land policies to protect arable land from declining [14]. On the other hand, farmers are encouraged to improve agricultural productivity and grain yield. One of the barriers to increased productivity is the fragmentation of farmland. The essential characteristic of modern farming is large-scale production. It is difficult to achieve this in rural China because it might fundamentally alter the existing small-scale farming tradition and the household responsibility system, which has divided the vast farmland into tiny pieces for every household [47]. From the perspective of the state, agricultural production should always be the major industry in rural areas. It is quite the reverse from the farmers' perspective. A large proportion of farmers chose not to engage in agriculture because of the low income [84]. Statistics indicate that in 2020, 49.4% of migrant workers are the young generation under 40 years old. Most of them have no work experience in farming and are not willing to return to rural areas. Who will be the farmers and who will feed China in the future have become pertinent questions posed to all [85]. Although secondary industry and rural tourism have achieved great success in some areas, drawing people back to farming is still an urgent task. The coordinated development of agricultural and non-agricultural industries is the goal of future rural development.

#### *4.2. Economic Growth and Environmental Conservation*

Economic growth and environmental conservation are objectives of rural development, which sometimes seem to be contradictory. Over the past 40 years, China has been committed to eliminating poverty and achieving prosperous development in rural areas [86]. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the rural economy was the focus of development. To improve the agricultural output, chemical fertilizers and pesticides have been excessively applied in most agricultural fields [43]. Economic growth has been not only the goal of farmers, but also a key performance indicator for local governments. In order to attract investment and increase job opportunities, some local governments have given permission to construct TVEs, which might cause negative impacts on the environment, without undergoing a strict environmental impact assessment [87]. In recent years, environmental conservation and sustainable development became the objectives of rural development, yet also led to serious dilemmas for rural people and local governments. It is generally not possible for farmers who suffer from poverty, to sacrifice their potential economic benefits in favor of indirect environmental protection benefits. Aiming for growth in the local GDP and employment rate, local governments will not shut down all the polluting TVEs. Moreover, upgrading the industry would increase the production cost, which might be not affordable for those small-scale factories [88]. Rural tourism could be a solution to this dilemma, but the transformation of the primary and secondary industry is facing great difficulties. How to achieve a balance between economic growth and environmental conservation would be the challenge of rural development.

#### *4.3. Urban and Rural Development*

It has been widely acknowledged that rural development is not in isolation from urban and regional development. Urban and rural areas should be given equal weight by policy-making [73]. The discourse has shifted from independent rural development to integrated urban-rural development. However, there are still some obstacles that cause a disparity between urban and rural areas, e.g., the duality of the hukou (户口) system and land tenure

system. The hukou system is a governmental household registration system, by which citizens are divided into urban residents and rural residents. They have different rights in many social affairs such as education, employment, social security, and residence [89]. The duality of the hukou system is a historical legacy and has led to many problems. For example, this system has severely damaged the interests of migrant workers, who work and live in cities but cannot benefit from urban education and medical service [90,91]. Land tenure is also different in urban and rural areas. According to the constitution and land management law, China applies socialist public ownership to land: land in urban areas is owned by the state, while land in rural areas is owned by rural collectives. Rural collectives refer to the organization of farmers, which is different from specific rural households or individuals. Although rural farmland was distributed to households in the 1980s, farmers only have the usage rights to it. The ambiguity in land ownership has largely restricted the freedom of farmers to use their land for non-agricultural activities [92]. Additionally, urban and rural land are treated differently in terms of leasing and expropriation. These institutional factors have caused the inequality of rights and opportunities between urban and rural residents. China is still in the process of rapid urbanization. In 2020, 64% of China's population lived in the urban areas and this number is estimated to continue to rise [12]. This means that, in the next decade, urban areas would continue to expand and more rural people would become urban citizens. To achieve harmonious regional development and reduce the disparity between urban and rural, institutional reform is necessary.

#### *4.4. Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches*

Due to the hierarchical administrative system in China, the implementation of policies follows the top-down principle. This means that policies and strategies of rural development are generally made by the central government and then carried out in rural areas based on the interpretation of local governments [93]. As national policies and strategies are promulgated for all rural areas in China, in general, they only provide guidelines and point out the direction of rural development. Therefore, the understanding and interpretation of these become critical. Local governments can formulate detailed policies according to local characteristics, but there is also a huge risk of misinterpretation, which might lead to development that is contrary to the national plan. The top-down tradition in China is often criticized for a lack of participation in policy-making [94]. For example, the needs and wills of rural people are often neglected during the land acquisition process. As a result, millions of farmers are incapable of protecting their rights and interests. This might lead to resistance to policies and even violent protests [14]. The perception and attitudes of rural people towards the development policies are crucial to China's social and political stability and should be valued. Farmers have made a significant contribution, not only to agricultural production, but also to institutional innovation. Many of the initiatives of rural development in China have been created by farmers, for example, the household responsibility system and land shareholding cooperative system. Therefore, bottom-up initiatives should be encouraged, and understanding the expectations of the rural people should be the foundation of reform in rural areas [95].

#### *4.5. Modernist and Postmodernist Discourses*

Gardner and Lewis point out that "modernization is essentially evolutionary", and industrialization and urbanization are the keys to this process. According to a modernist discourse, the country would finally develop into "an industrialized, urban and ordered society". The theories of modernization are criticized for neglecting the "political implications of growth on the micro level" [96]. On the other side, postmodernist philosophy recognizes the "importance and potential of local knowledge", which leads to the notions of participation and the "farmer first" movement in rural areas [97]. In the Chinese context, the modernist discourse on rural development concentrates on the development of the rural economy. The instruments include the modernization of agriculture, the construction

of public infrastructure, and the promotion of urbanization. In recent years, more attention has been paid to the postmodernist discourse in both academic and political fields. Rural social and cultural development is identified as an essential part of rural development. Social harmony, the quality of rural life, and the preservation of traditional culture are emphasized. At present, modernist and postmodernist discourses coexist in China, which is different from the development path of most developed countries. Due to the complex history of rural China and its unique characteristics, the experiences from other countries might not be practicable. Hence, China must find its way to achieve comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable rural development.

## 5. Conclusions

In this study, we employ a quantitative approach and analyze the shifts of discourses in rural development over the past 40 years. We identify the top 25 keywords in each five-year development cycle and classify them into five categories, i.e., development paradigms, development focal points, actors, places, and activities. From the results of our analysis, eight development paradigms are distinguished. Then we embed them in the socio-economic and political contexts. The discursive shifts show not only the problems that rural people are faced with, but also the countermeasures that are taken. From the reform and opening-up policy in 1978 to the early 1990s, the discourse has focused on the economic dimension of rural development. The “household responsibility system” was implemented as an instrument to increase agricultural output. The “rural commodity economy” has improved the exchange and sale of agricultural products, while the “social market economy” has also promoted the industrial transformation in rural areas. The primary objectives in this period were to enhance agricultural productivity and promote rural economic development. In the 1990s, the environmental problems have drawn the increasing attention of Chinese society. “Sustainable development” has become the goal of rural development, which emphasizes the importance of environmental conservation and the rational use of resources. In the 2000s, “Sannong” was proposed to solve the problems relating to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. The discourse has shifted towards the social dimension of rural development. The rural livelihood has become one of the major concerns, and the objectives were to increase the farmers’ income and alleviate poverty in rural areas. “Building a new socialist countryside” aimed to create a new image for rural areas. “Beautiful countryside” emphasized environmental and cultural preservation. “Rural revitalization” required overall reform in social, economic, environmental, and political aspects. It can be concluded that the understanding and interpretation of rural development have become more comprehensive. The discourses on actors, places, and activities have also changed. Farmers can be regarded as one of the most important actors in rural areas. With the changing contexts, their identities have evolved to specialized households, migrant workers, and new farmers. The enterprises, especially the TVEs, have played an important role in rural economic development. The rural cooperatives have inspired the initiative and creativity of farmers. It has been acknowledged that rural development cannot be separated from urban development. The urban–rural integration is the approach to achieve coordinated development. However, some institutional factors have caused a disparity. Agriculture has always been a major activity in rural areas, but the focal points of agricultural production have changed over time. Modern agriculture has been pursued to achieve an upgrading of the industry. Rural tourism is currently regarded as a promising industry for future development. It can be predicted that the discourses concerning rural development will continue to evolve in accordance with the changing contexts. The discussion section has summarized the key features of the current discourse, which are the duality between agricultural and non-agricultural industries, economic growth and environmental conservation, urban and rural development, top-down and bottom-up approaches, and modernist and postmodernist discourses. To resolve the conflicts and achieve a balanced development, the reform should be implemented in various aspects, such as removing institutional barriers and improving rural governance.

This study applies a descriptive and analytical approach and provides an example of discourse analysis with a quantitative method. The methodology can be used to identify the discursive shifts on other topics. The results depict an overview of rural development in China over the past 40 years. It helps people to have a general understanding of the development process and the tasks at different stages. However, we must admit the limits of this study. First, the discourses we derived are mainly from academic and political perspectives. The lay discourses, which refer to words and concepts that are used in people's everyday communication, are not well collected and included. Moreover, the study lacks an in-depth analysis of rural transformation in China. We suggest that analysis of statistical data is needed in further research to identify the temporal development process and spatial distribution patterns of rural development.

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