

**Post-Rural Urbanization in China: Learning from University  
Engagements in Village Transformation Processes**

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M.Eng.  
Huang Huang

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**Promotionsausschuss:**

Vorsitzender: Prof. Jörg Stollmann

Gutachter: Prof. Dr. Philipp Misselwitz

Gutachter: Prof. Dr. Guiqing Yang

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## Abstract

Within China, urban areas are seen as the fundamental arena of market and growth while rural areas are considered to be sites of subsidiary resource provision. This viewpoint, and its corresponding neglect of rural development, has widened the gap between urban and rural China. Low-end industrial sprawl, planned demolitions, and the “Socialist New Villages” all increasingly problematized rural urbanization. However, from the perspective of planetary urbanization, rural regions can no longer be conceptually isolated as a binary counterpoint to the “urban,” since the “rural” has also been greatly affected by global agendas. Besides a knowledge gap in the theorization of the rural, previous research has exclusively emphasized the problematic nature of previous rural urbanization within a policy-making framework, rather than critically recognizing the rural context, or including a consideration of new initiatives that have sprung up outside of existing administrative frameworks. To fill the gap, this dissertation focused on exploratory practices that began around 2008, all of which sought new alternative approaches to rural transformation and aimed at revitalizing villages while simultaneously expanding the knowledge base on possible opportunities and existing diversities. Xianqiao Village and Shatan Village are two representative examples of such exploratory practices led by professors from Tongji University. An examination of these two cases revealed that agriculture – fundamental to local rural existence – was innovatively enhanced by the practices. Among other initiatives, these practices led to a re-definition of urban-rural relationships, a reconnection of rural networks, the introduction of alternative spatial intervention methods, and the encouragement of local involvement. In this process, valuable lessons were learnt, which were reflected in changing frameworks and led to new planning paradigms. However, this research argues that the focus on tourism as a major development strategy in Xianqiao and Shatan led to the intrusion of certain social values which were alien to the local population, which in turn, resulted in the further exclusion of rural residents. The inclusion of the locals primarily in the form of land-leasing contracts and a limited number of temporary job opportunities are far from sufficient to stimulate sustainable development processes and to address the major social challenges facing these rural areas. This thesis therefore concludes that the formulation of creative approaches that involve local residents and help to implement their initiatives, and a responsive urban-rural policy framework that explicitly reflects the initiatives, without minimizing either the enthusiasm for the projects nor the participation of villagers, are both imperative for rural urbanization.

## Zusammenfassung

Während urbane Zentren in China in erster Linie einer markt- und wachstumsorientierten Raumentwicklung unterliegen, gelten ländliche Räume primär als Räume, in denen die für das städtische Wachstum notwendigen Ressourcen und Energien gewonnen werden. Diese Perspektive sowie die damit verbundene Vernachlässigung ländlicher Entwicklung haben die räumliche und kulturelle Dichotomie zwischen dem „urbanen“ und „ländlichen“ China zunehmend verstärkt. Ansätze wie beispielsweise die Eingrenzung industrieller und urbaner Zersiedelung, geplanter Rückbau von verlassenen Dörfern sowie die Planungen der „Socialist New Villages“ versuchen zwar die Herausforderungen ländlicher Urbanisierungsprozesse nachhaltig zu gestalten, dennoch beruhen sie alle nach wie vor auf der prinzipiellen Unterscheidung zwischen „urbanen“ und „ländlichen“ Räumen. Da ländliche Räume jedoch globalen Urbanisierungsprozessen unterliegen sowie diese wesentlich mitgestalten, können sie, vor allem unter der Perspektive einer planetaren Urbanisierung, konzeptionell nicht länger als isolierter Gegenpart zu urbanen Prozessen und Räumen betrachtet werden. Bisherige wissenschaftliche Arbeiten haben sich in diesem Kontext vor allem auf die Hervorhebung der vielfältigen Herausforderungen von ländlichen Urbanisierungsprozessen innerhalb politischer Rahmenplanungen fokussiert, anstatt jedoch die Definition des „Ländlichen“ selbst kritisch zu hinterfragen sowie die Potentiale neuer und jenseits administrativer Planungsstrukturen agierender Initiativen zwischen „Stadt“ und „Land“ zu berücksichtigen. Um diese Lücke zu schließen, fokussiert die Dissertation auf die Untersuchung explorativer Stadt-Land Praktiken, die um 2008 mit dem Ziel alternativer und nachhaltiger Ansätze ländlicher Urbanisierung begannen und sich in erster Linie auf die Revitalisierung von Dörfern konzentrieren. Xianqiao Village und Shatan Village sind hierfür zwei repräsentative Beispiele, die durch die Tongji Universität initiiert wurden. Die Untersuchung dieser beiden Beispiele zeigt unter anderem, dass lokale Landwirtschaft - ursprünglich fundamentale Basis des ländlichen Lebens - auf innovative Art und Weise durch die neuen Praktiken re-interpretiert und gestärkt wurde. Neben anderen Initiativen führten vor allem auch diese beiden Beispiele zu einer Art Neudeutung von Stadt-Land Beziehungen in der Region, der Wiederverbindung von ländlichen Netzwerken, der Einführung von alternativen räumlichen Interventionen, sowie der Stärkung lokalen Engagements vor Ort. In diesem Kontext konnten im Laufe des letzten Jahrzehnts zahlreiche neue Erkenntnisse gewonnen und bereits in sich ändernde Planungsansätze innerhalb der Region integriert werden. Dennoch zeigt und argumentiert die Dissertation, dass der hauptsächliche Fokus auf touristische Entwicklungsstrategien in der Region rund um Xianqiao und Shatan zu einem weiter anhaltenden Ausschluss lokaler Akteure führt, da die anhaltenden

Prozesse auf soziale Werte basieren, welche der lokalen Bevölkerung fremd sind. Die reine Einbindung der lokalen Bevölkerung durch Pachtverträge und einer limitierten Anzahl von meist zeitlich begrenzten Anstellungsmöglichkeiten reicht hierbei nicht aus, um wirklich nachhaltige Entwicklungsprozesse in der Region zu stimulieren und den Herausforderungen des gesellschaftlichen Wandels in ländlichen Räumen Chinas langfristig zu begegnen. Daher braucht es zwingend, so argumentiert die Arbeit, kreative Planungsansätze, die sowohl lokale Akteure und deren bereits laufenden Initiativen und Praktiken integrieren, als auch ein politisches Rahmenwerk, das progressive Stadt-Land Beziehungen reflektiert sowie Prozesse der Teilhabe und Partizipation lokaler Akteure ermöglicht.

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## Abbreviations

ANT	Actor-network Theory
BVC	Beautiful Villages Construction
CAUP	College of Architecture and Urban Planning
CCTV	China Central Television
CNY	China Yuan
CPC	Communist Party of China
CUMULUS	International Association of Universities and Colleges of Art, Design and Media
DESIS	Design for Social Innovating and Sustainability
DH	DESIGN Harvests
EU	European Union
HSR	High Speed Rail
OVOP	One Village One Product
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRD	Pearl River Delta
RD	Rural Development
RO	Reform and Opening up
SOEs	State Owed Enterprises
SNV	Socialist New Villages
YRD	Yangtze River Delta

## Introduction

Across numerous countries, the major theme of development in the early twentieth century was the rapid amalgamation of massive industrial urban regions and suburbanizing zones, causing significant demographic, social-economic, and the environmental shifts in rural regions (Schmid 2017). China, as a vast, and comparatively isolated country, presents a typical example of this type of development, beginning this journey in 1978, by promoting a national policy known as “Reform and Opening up (RO)”. During this process, the outlines of China’s “market economy” – still dependent upon state investment – became clear, and were subsequently reinforced by the fiscal reforms of 1994, as a new development strategy, which would greatly contribute to capitalist urbanization. It was an official farewell to the traditional agrarian economy, wherein rural China participated almost exclusively as the essential supplier of raw goods. Over the course of the decades, this shift widened the gap between rural and urban China, reinforcing a dual-track urban-rural policy that had initially been formulated to protect the most economically disadvantaged stratum in Chinese society. To narrow this asymmetry in rural versus urban development, continuing national capital investment, favorable policies, and romanticized planning processes inherent to the “Socialist New Villages (SNV)” were encouraged, although problems remained, and were sometimes even aggravated.

Meanwhile, shortly before the global economic crisis in 2008, the domestic urbanization paradigm, driven by an intensive capital investment in labor, natural resources, and land (among other goods and services), was recognized as increasingly problematic. Chinese economic growth was becoming more obviously tied to the state, and increasingly identified with it, as a force encouraged “by means of the State, and the State becomes the stimulant of economic growth (Lefebvre 2009, 58),” which eventually resulted, as predicted, in a “qualitative transformation (Lefebvre 2009, 121)”.

One of the fundamental trends in national policy was the direct intervention in the formation and development of rural spaces. Though the path forward in terms of rural transformation was often unclear, a number of exploratory practices emerged. On a unprecedented scale, more and more individuals – both within and outside political and administrative frameworks – shifted their focuses toward rural China. This transformation was consistent with an increasingly fierce questioning, across various national contexts, of the theoretical basis for the rural-urban divide, as “the demarcations separating urban, suburban and rural zones were recognized to shift historically, but the spaces themselves were assumed to remain discreet, distinct and universal

(Schmid 2017, 186)”. New concepts and definitions were proposed to fill the lack of suitable descriptors, among them “Postruraler Raum,” meant to highlight the increasingly fuzzy demarcation line between rural and urban regions during this period, and to emphasize the need to avoid ubiquitous and normative interpretations of the rural-urban divide (Pretterhofer, Spath, and Vöckler 2010). These trends and discussions provide the critical context for this discourse and help define post-rural urbanization in China.

The knowledge gap in the theorization of the rural effectively restrained the scope of previous research of the rural experience. This formerly dominant normative definition of the rural has prevented the contextualization of this discourse –neither within a regional urbanization framework, nor larger global agendas. Beyond that, earlier research has consistently emphasized the problematic nature of previous rural urbanization within a policy-making framework, rather than critically recognizing the rural context. Furthermore this research has neglected a consideration of new initiatives that have sprung up outside of existing administrative frameworks. This gap in the research is reflected in the fact that “support for social and functional development does not take place but must be intensified with a view towards sustainable inner-village development” (Peter, Fengler, and Moser 2013). The dissertation presented was designed to address these omissions.

The main questions and sub-questions proposed by this research are the following:

1. **What are the current dynamics and policy approaches within rural urbanization affecting rural hinterland regions in China?**
  - (1) What are the focuses of urbanization processes, and how have they shifted over time?
  - (2) What are the features of this changing policy, what are the trends going forward, and how do different approaches (at separate levels of government) impact post-rural urbanization?
  
2. **What is the impact of the research engaged in and practices initiated by Chinese universities for the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) region?**
  - (1) How have the practices engaged in by the university changed, in response to changing trends in rural development?
  - (2) What are effects of these interventions on **the participating actors and on their relationships?**
  - (3) **Through these different exploratory practices, how are the various relationships constructed and how does decision-making power shift among the actors engaged in this process?**

### **3. Can these practices be scaled up to inform a sustainable post-rural, actor-driven development paradigm?**

(1) How do the university engaged practices reflect their achievements in different frameworks?

(2) How does one build an awareness of both the opportunities and risks for rural transformation emerging from these new dynamics within post-rural urbanization in China?

This dissertation focused on the new practices that were implemented without a pre-existing set of guidelines and rules in place. These practices realized different objectives in rural areas based on their distinct understanding of urban-rural relationships and the ideal role of the rural in urbanization processes. Two emblematic and influential cases led by Tongji University, Xianqiao Village and Shatan Village, each initiated with differing motivations, and implemented with distinct approaches, were selected and studied.

Xianqiao Village was mainly transformed from the bottom up through a series of experimental projects, currently led by the Design Harvests (DH) team, an independent company originally founded by members of Tongji University. Shatan Village's revitalization, on the other hand, occurred through a top-down planning process, based on a long-term strategic cooperation between local authorities and Tongji University. Through the in-depth qualitative analysis of these cases, this dissertation correspondingly examines critical moments in the transformations engaged in by the university. Moreover, it compares the differences between the selected case studies, focusing on the motivations for the various initiatives, their interventional approaches, the negotiations inherent in the decision-making process, the processes of spatial transformation, and the changes in actor-networks, in order to elucidate if locally sustainable dynamics were created through these interventions. The evidence from the comparative case studies reveals that some benefits were realised through these exploratory practices, especially in terms of upgrades to rural infrastructure, the recognition of and establishment of rural identities, the interconnection of these villages to larger resource networks of rural revitalization, the increase in visibility leading to greater regional investment, and an increase in job opportunities. More importantly, the tendency towards decentralisation was reflected, in both cases, in the various aspects of actors' participation, their spatial and economic interventions, and resources assemblage. Even top-down rural development projects could eventually be characterized by "bottom-up" criteria.

However, the experimental practices described in these two case studies still suffer from challenges to their sustainability on three levels. On the macro level, the consequences of the relevant rural development policies remain unpredictable. Take the most crucial example – the land policy, upon which all these experimental projects based themselves upon: It is still too early to judge if the shift in land policy will result in a legal, and fair, land market, or if it was merely a strategic retreat under pressure from contemporary global and domestic development forces. Whichever it ends up being, in both case studies, the land-leasing contract is currently the main point of connection between the operational projects and the villagers and could result in the potential exclusion of local actors. On the mid-level, development opportunities, including funding and support policies, grew out of the initiative of individuals rather than out of distinct local resources. In line with Paul Knox and Steven Pinch, these case studies show how previous urbanization patterns were replaced by a kind of fresh dynamic, fuelled by “enclaves of superconnected people (Knox and Pinch 2009, 7)” as part of this so-called “splintering urbanism” (Graham and Marvin 2001) process. However, this phenomenon is, of course, a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it is exciting for rural regions endowed only with “common-place resources” or without a defining regional identity, since such a dynamic presents a promising opportunity for creative development, or at least, the ability to re-enter regional networks in a better position than before. While, on the other hand, it is hard to predict the outcome if the key person attracting all these development opportunities or the person most associated with these incoming resources, shifts their focus, since most of these development opportunities follow directly from specific individuals (such as prominent professors) versus flowing from larger development processes. Would these villages still possess a promising future, and continue function as they do at present? Last but not least, from a micro-level perspective, it is important to understand the consequences of new values intruding on existing communities. The current emphasis of the projects in both villages is on re-connecting the rural economy, its lifestyle, and culture to broader networks, based on identified and emphasized local elements. However, connecting weaker rural social networks and local everyday life to more powerful urban ones inherently contains certain risks. Through these practices, a stronger, more competitive, connected and urban mainstream accepted external culture and value-set is, consciously or unconsciously, intruding into these rural spaces. Therefore, as rural villages have fewer residents able to participate in these urbanization processes, it is harder to predict the persistence of local interest and the sustainability of local involvement, or the effects of new social and cultural values, latently introduced by these experimental practices, which could further encourage and increase social exclusion.

All the issues raised here point to critical concerns about the sustainability of rural development dynamics as sustained by exploratory practices. This study, therefore, argues if a sustainable development dynamic is to be achieved, then rural transformation methods and actor-driven mechanisms must continue to be improved by integrating other methods of substantial local involvement through an co-operative planning process. The formulation of creative approaches that both involve local actors and stimulate their own initiatives, as well as a responsive urban-rural policy framework that explicitly reflects these initiatives, without dampening either enthusiasm for the projects nor the participation of villagers, are imperative for the success of rural urbanization. The study further expands its analysis onto a more concrete and practical level, with a self-check chart on sustainable development dynamics, which might be helpful as a (self-) examination tool to encourage a more complete and cohesive framework for other experimental projects in rural regions (although it comes with its own limitations).

The dissertation comprises three parts [Figure 1]. The first part provides a critical discussion of rural urbanization in a global context, as well as in China from 1978 to 2018. It conceptualizes and contextualizes post-rural urbanization, analyses common concerns and identifies longstanding and on-going challenges. The second part comprises the empirical study, which delineates the research questions and reflects on the subject, through an in-depth analysis and comparison of two case studies, both geographically located in the region of the Yangtze River Delta, which both reflect influential experimental practices led by the Tongji University in contemporary rural China. The final part analyses the theoretical and practical contributions of this research to the post-rural urbanization in China and recommendations for future research.

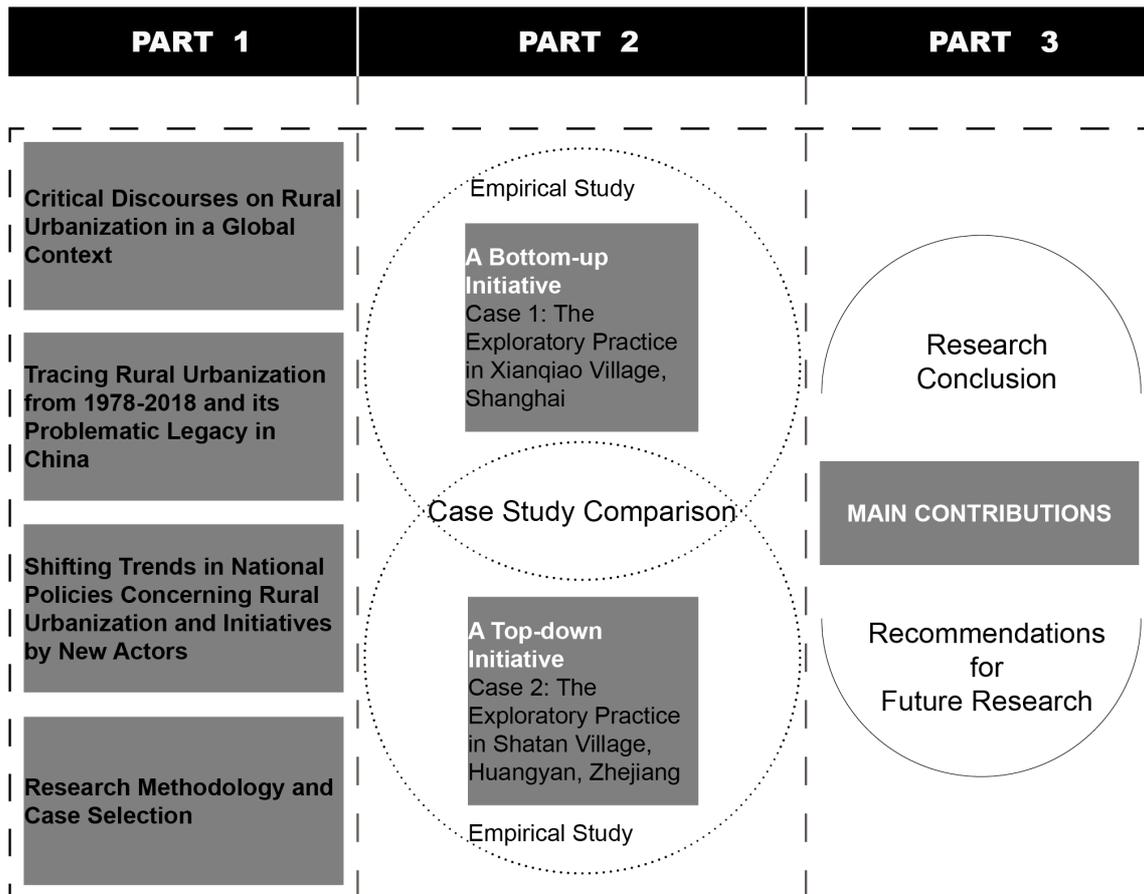


Figure 1 The framework of the research content

Source: Author's construction

### Chapter 1 Critical Discourses on Rural Urbanization in a Global Context

Through a dialectic discussion of the relationships between urbanization, capital, and space in a global context, this chapter introduces a new conceptualization of the urban-rural, which progressively formed under the conditions produced by globalization. It provides a new perspective on current trends in rural urbanization, including the internal relationships among different actors, the development of obstacles and challenges, and different appeals among others. It describes, in brief, the experiences of contemporary rural urbanization in highly urbanized countries, including Germany, England and Wales, and Japan. The aim here is to reflect on this new rural phenomenon, the planning approaches, and the common challenges and concerns on a global scale.

### Chapter 2 Tracing Rural Urbanization from 1978-2018 and its Problematic Legacy in China

This chapter focuses on the changing relationships and shifting notions of space between the urban and the rural in the Chinese context, through a discussion of the major pressures and

legacies of different urbanization phases. Contemporary problems are critically analyzed, while future scenarios are predicted based on a wide-ranging analysis of the studies conducted by scholars in various disciplines. Further, this chapter includes an analysis of the delicate internal entanglements and shifting intentions of the major actors in rural China. Finally, the domestic context of this study is carefully delineated, with controversial concepts gradually introduced and contextualized.

### **Chapter 3 Shifting Trends in National Policies Concerning Rural Urbanization and Initiatives by New Actors**

This chapter outlines how the constant framing and re-framing of national policies according to the shifting nature of both the consequences of globalization and national development objectives directly affected rural urbanization, and how new initiatives appeared in the process. The policies most relevant to urbanization in rural areas, such as national land policy, major economic policy, household policy, and the most recent rural construction policies, are systematically analyzed. Furthermore, the implementation process is also discussed, as it led to the new interactions within the administrative hierarchy and created deviations to the “top-down” policy implementation expected in a highly centralized country. This chapter covers the context for the policy decisions in which the case studies are embedded and analyses the framework which allowed and encouraged initiatives by new actors.

### **Chapter 4 Research Methodology and Case Selection**

The research framework is structured around the main research questions, which were designed based on an understanding of the global context and the domestic situation discussed in the previous chapters. In line with an inductive research plan, the case study is the major strategy. The cases and their selection criteria are outlined here, as well as the theoretical tools, which are employed as lenses to help elucidate the problems and to set the benchmark for analyzing the sustainability of specific practices. This research also emphasizes the application of anthropological research methods in the case studies. As argued by Cloke: “There are very important issues for rural research which do focus on rural areas themselves. There is a need to explore more deeply the notion of varying problematic experiences in rural lifestyles” (Cloke 1993, 119).

### **Chapter 5 Case study of Xianqiao Village: the “DESIGN Harvests”**

As a project initiated by the research group at Tongji university, this case study is introduced in reference to its regional context, the evolution of rural urbanization in the area, current

challenges, and the implementation of Design Harvests, with an emphasis on the exploratory practice in the village. Vignettes are employed to depict the experiences in the village, without subjective input, followed by an analysis and discussion of each thematic group of vignettes. The preliminary conclusion focuses on the achievements of the DH, and at the same time critically discusses, among others, the interventional approaches, operational mechanisms, and current outcomes.

### **Chapter 6 Case Study of Shatan Village: the “Beautiful Villages Construction”**

As a case study initiated by the local government and led by the university, Shatan is introduced in reference to its including the regional context, the evolution of rural urbanization in the area, current challenges, and the implementation of the national Beautiful Village Construction policy, with an emphasis on the experimental practice in the village. Vignettes are employed to display the experiences in the villages, followed by an analysis and discussion of each thematic group of vignettes. The preliminary conclusion focuses on the achievements of the exploratory practice, and at the same time critically discusses, among others, the interventional approaches, operational mechanisms, and current outcomes.

### **Chapter 7 Case Study Comparison**

After a separate discussion of each case, this chapter compares the two cases with an emphasis on outcomes, plans for implementation, the process from investment to final operations, etc. The collected pros and cons are analyzed in regard to optimizing planning/design approaches. The actor-network theory is employed to guide the analyses of the shifting relationships between actors. Furthermore, this chapter clarifies the losses and gains, inclusion and exclusion of the various actors.

### **Chapter 8 Conclusion**

This chapter synthesized the main findings of the previous chapters. Based on these conclusions, practical and theoretical contributions are proposed in regard to rural transformation within a non-binary understanding of relations between rural and urban regions. The shifts within and between actor-networks are emphasized: The “exclusion” of the locals, explicitly and implicitly, is a crucial, if not the pre-eminent, problem facing rural revitalization. Creative approaches toward increasing “inclusion” and various internal forms of actor-driven and community empowered dynamics are imperative to the success of rural sustainability, a reality which needs to be appropriately folded into and reflected in policy frameworks. Therefore, a self-checklist on sustainable rural transformation is proposed, and future research directions are recommended.

**Part 1 Rural Urbanization as a Global Challenge and a Critical  
Discourse in the Chinese Context**

# Chapter 1: Critical Discourses on Rural Urbanization in a Global Context

## 1.1 Urbanization, Capital Accumulation, and Capitalist Space

The term urbanization is perceived so disparately among scholars and practitioners in various sub-disciplines, that the concept has remained contested – even among those in the same field. Some scholars define it quite comprehensively, as a process – a significant assemblage of spatial organizations of human societies – that features a tremendous convergence of population and activities into a diffuse, yet specific, cultural system: “This confusion is ideological and is intended: (a) To establish a correspondence between ecological forms and a cultural content. (b) To suggest an ideology of production of social values on the basis of ‘natural’ phenomenon of social densification and heterogeneity” (Castells 1977, 15). From a geographical perspective, urbanization has profoundly restructured and continues to restructure world geography at an intense pace (Swyngedouw 2004). From the perspective of urban political ecology scholars, urbanization essentially proceeds as a procession of geographically organized, socio-environmental, metabolisms that are, to be more specific, “mobilised through relations that combine the accumulation of socio-natural use and exchange-values, which shape, produce, maintain and transform the metabolic vehicles that permit the expanded reproduction of the urban as a historically determined but contingent form of life” (Cook and Swyngedouw 2012).

Even within different conceptualizations of urbanization, some inter-disciplinary consensus can be found on the subject of the entrenched relationships between urbanization and capitalism, and urbanization per se. Harvey confined himself to the capitalist forms of urbanization in order to argue for the idea that the “urban” is endowed with particular meaning under the “capitalist mode of production which cannot be carried over without a radical transformation of meaning (and of reality) into other social contexts” (Harvey 1978, 101). World capitalism, in its current state-centric arrangement, is “premised upon a spatially isomorphic relationship between capital accumulation, urbanization and state regulation,” an arrangement that has been dissembling itself since the global economic crises of the early 1970s’ (Brenner 1999, 432). Admittedly, the processes of urbanization have not always evolved in parallel ways, especially as they proceed in various, diverse, contexts. However, urbanization is increasingly linked to and is affected by globalization, and remains a “fundamentally capitalist urban process”, based on the recognition of the “dimension of urbanization—mediated, of course, through state institutions, diverse social forces and systemic crisis tendencies at all spatial scales— [which] figures

crucially in producing and reproducing contemporary geographies of deprivation, dispossession and marginalization, both within and among urban regions throughout the world” (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011, 237). As Erik Swyngedouw argues, “Capitalism has always been a decidedly geographical project and globalization has been part of the capitalist enterprise from at least 1492, if not before” (Eric Swyngedouw 2004, 29). Based on the study of Bruno Latour (1993) and Donna Haraway (1991), scholars in urban political ecology also claim that “capitalism and urbanization are fundamentally hybrid processes” which result in the assemblage, entanglement, and transformation of social and biophysical elements, and the production of “socio-natural cyborgs” (E. Swyngedouw 2006; Cook and Swyngedouw 2012).

Today, capitalism creatively destroys (Harvey 2007) through urbanization on an unprecedented scale. These shifts formulate and constantly produce space, from simply occupying space all the way to more direct philosophical and “rational” interventions. As early as the 1970s, Lefebvre actively engaged in the discourse of the capitalist production of space. He argued that no matter how capitalism itself was formed (conceptualized as capitalism or neo-capitalism), it had already “produced an abstract space,” considering its impact on both domestic and global levels, enabled by capital flows and national politics. While this “abstract space” is supported by huge commercial networks, including banks and corporations, large production centers, and other spatial interventions, including information and transportation networks consisting of highways and airports, among others. In this sense, space acts as the “cradle of accumulation, the place of richness, the subject of history, the center of historical space” – the urban exploded (Lefebvre 2009, 173). Space, in the broadest sense, both visible and invisible, as well as everything enclosed in that space, including air and light, have a role in the circuit of capitalist production, simultaneously as forces and products. The urban area, supported by communication and exchange networks, and the infrastructure gathered within it, are all approaches to production, belonging to capital flows. Lefebvre pushes this observation even further, by claiming that the “space as a whole enters into the modernized mode of capitalist production: it is utilized to produce surplus value.” He continues, “Space remains a model, a perpetual prototype of use value resisting the generalizations of exchange and exchange value in a capitalist economy under the authority of a homogenizing state”(Lefebvre 2009, 176). However, as the use-value of space was re-recognized on a vast scale, affecting politics and even expressed in certain political strategies, the production of space has become all-encompassing: “The fetishism of an abstract economics is being transformed into the fetishism of an abstract economic space. Space-become-commodity develops the traits of commodities in space to the maximum”. We are already able to ascertain how surplus value is produced, whilst having only a vague notion of how it is realized and distributed as financial networks are partitioned from the places of

production. Eventually space began to engage in these patterns in similar ways, so as to support emerging industries – take information technology and leisure for instance – as well as to support the increasing role of multinational corporations in global economic flows (Lefebvre 1992, 350, 351).

This dimension extended to time as well, as “abstract space reveals its oppressive and repressive capacities in relation to time. It rejects time as an abstraction—except when it concerns work, the producer of things and of surplus value. Time is reduced to constraints of space: schedules, runs, crossings, loads” (Lefebvre 2009, 173). Space is naturally vested with a use value and exchange value, but time is tied to its use value as it fundamentally and essentially constitutes or carries on the everyday life of human beings. Unfortunately, the time loses its basic attribute of use value and becomes merchandized in the modern social space. “Lived time loses form and social interest except for the time of work. Economic space subordinates time, whereas political space eradicates it, because it is threatening to existing power relations. The primacy of the economic, and still more, of the political, leads to the supremacy of space over time”(Lefebvre 2009, 176).

However, the basic attribution of space is hidden, understood as neutral or innocent, and thus unsuitable as a subject for urban planning. While urban planning, as an effective tool for the conduct of direct interventions into space, was monopolized by a singular theory, that was both difficult to elaborate but formed a coherent ideology of urban planning as a science (Lefebvre 2009, 156,157). One ability of urban planning is its analysis of space through scientific and rational theories, languages and practices, which reflect a political, economic and geographic hierarchy, both globally and locally. As important as its ability to intervene in space, spatial planning also implicitly and explicitly manipulates the energy, materials, capital, information, and population flows, in accordance with the existing plans and further forms tangible and intangible symbols, cultures, values, identities in the process: “It endeavors to connect and coordinate these multiple flows in space. In which space? In great geopolitical units (Europe, etc.) that are inscribed in the worldwide” (Lefebvre 2009, 185,186).

Space – produced and constantly reproduced, dominated by contemporary productive relations – is manipulated into an agenda of “homogeneity–fragmentation–hierarchization”(Lefebvre 2009, 194,195). The conclusion is reached that a general strategy frames the contemporary world, which cannot be understood as a society that is globalized or be perceived as a totality, but as a strategy with particular objectives, capable of achieving its objectives through an assemblage of all the resources a state has at its disposal. This was conceptualized by Lefebvre as

“a new mode of production that is no longer exactly capitalism, which is not socialism: a state mode of production”(Lefebvre 2009, 149). This mode of production was not limited to a certain region but processed through the channel of “mondialisation”, where capital markets transferred the surplus value, wherever an accumulation of investments and productive capital has begun to occur. Socialist countries are also conceptualized in this assessment, for “they too are sites of investments but also of accumulation (of the means of production), technology markets, enormous reserves of labor power, etc. A mondialisation and diversification of the class struggle ensues which penetrates physical, social and mental space, creating new cleavages”. (Lefebvre 2009, 224,225)

Currently, urbanization itself has been criticized as being both internally problematic and a crucible of conflicts, against which “the urban transformation towards which subversive energies, dissident analyses and counter-hegemonic visions are directed”, making not only a “critical perspective on the neoliberalizing, increasingly planetary forms of market-disciplinary urban transformation” since the 1980s is urgently in need, but also an understanding of the causes and dynamics behind the transformation (Brenner 2016, 17).

## **1.2 Urban-Rural Conceptualizations under Planetary Urbanization**

The urban and rural as part of space, no matter how it is conceptualized, is not able to escape its fundamental attributes as productive forces, with products that contain use value and exchange value under capitalist forms of urbanization. As capitalist urbanization spreads across the global through diverse geographical territories, permeating – as well as forming – vast networks, which instantaneously enabled and strengthened the “interdependencies and hierarchize them [global links] in historically new, highly conflictual ways...geographical scales have become both arenas and objects of sociopolitical contestation as a wide range of sociopolitical forces interact to reconfigure the territorial organization of capitalism” (Brenner 2000, 369).

Thus, the urban and rural, previously partitioned as binary concepts, have become invisible: It cannot be recognized from spatial divisions on the ground, as a division between center and periphery, or from a visual division between distinctly natural versus artificial scenery, or from a division of labor between agriculture and industry, or from the divide in levels of connectivity, or by synthesizing all these distinctions, based on a study of the entrenched interconnections between urbanization, capital accumulation and capitalist space. These vast networks, both those reflected in space and those that do not, have already expanded beyond the vertical

hierarchies of a single nation. For that reason, no object reflected in these networks can be studied in isolation. The urban and rural, as two crucially significant actors in these networks, whose relationship between each other is inevitably and urgently in need of a re-conceptualization from an updated perspective.

As Lefebvre stated, the State controls the paths of worldness as the modern world has becoming global (Lefebvre 2009, 251). This control over these channels can similarly applied to regions whose boundaries are blurring based on the global market: “The worldwide does not define itself by Nature; the latter opens onto the worldwide, but transformed into “second nature,” disturbing and poorly defined ” (Lefebvre 2009, 251). As early as the 1970s, Lefebvre argued that although urban and rural areas can no longer be separated, they continue to exist in the same space, but with different assignments, rather than being “harmoniously superseded”. He continues, “Morphologically, this relationship (in the modern State) results in a shapeless mixture, in chaos, despite the administrative order and spatial logistics of the State”(Lefebvre 2009, 205).

The extensive and conflictual process of structuring and re-structuring space which Lefebvre organized within his homogeneity–fragmentation–hierarchization schema decades ago has subsequently expanded on an unprecedented scale. In the 1970s, this process of restructuring space was directed by the theory of functional specificity, which, in the 1980s, shifted the focus of analysis from scale-specificity to larger productions of space. Beginning in the 1990s, fierce debates sprung up, bringing up questions about basic urban theory, all the way to the role of globalization, and reformulations of urban questions (Brenner 2000, 361) based on vast new empirical evidence from urban practices from across the globe. More recently, certain claims, resulting from the continued, but unpredictable, decline of the spatial bias in academic research on space, have become progressively stronger, including that “entire fabric of planetary settlement space is now being both extensively and intensively urbanized” (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011, 226), a notion which is in accordance with the hypothesis Lefebvre proposed in 1970, that “Society has been completely urbanized. This hypothesis implies a definition: An urban society is a society that results from a process of complete urbanization. This urbanization is virtual today, but will become real in the future” (Lefebvre 2003, 17). In that sense, the type of urbanization that has exploded worldwide is not limited to a territorial concept or formally established boundaries, but has led to a critical reconsideration of the appropriateness and applicability of previous concepts and approaches for the understanding of spatial transformations. A striking example is the use of the proportion of urban versus rural residents to describe the degree of urbanization in a region, a concept that is already difficult to

define in contemporary times and its criteria is highly contested. Such outdated theories cannot “even begin to capture the intellectual, representational and political complexities associated with grasping the contemporary global urban condition” (Brenner, Wachsmuth, and Madden 2012).

“This lens, ground in the context of the 19th century metropolis, interprets the world through a series of binary associations hung on the basic assumption that the city can be defined against a non-urban outside [...] I argue that the main axis along which urban studies’ foundational assumptions have been changed opposites, as traditionally ‘non-urban’ research sites and subjects increasingly intrude on urban environments” (Angelo 2017).

As scholars have adjusted their depictions of the current experience of time and space, “the networks, connections, flows and mobility have all established themselves as compelling conceptual frames for research, the rural has increasingly been recast in relational terms as a multi-authored and multi-faceted space, constituted through local-global interconnections and their place specific, some-times contested, manifestations” (Heley and Jones 2012, 208). As such, the recognition of the rural as a critical focus of analysis is no longer limited to academic discourses, but now extends to strategies and crucial policies formulated by governments and residents in various nations.

There is obviously no easy shortcut to reaching a comparatively unified concept of the urban and the rural. However, it is still possible to allay certain common concerns. Firstly, despite distinctly different approaches, perspectives, and priorities among scholars in their perception of the urban and the rural within the context of urbanization, all consider the entrenched interconnections between the rural and the urban within these vast supporting networks, shaped and reshaped by the urbanization process, to be critically important. It is crucial to question previous theoretical frameworks, all of which guided major spatial interventions in both the Global North and the Global South with often problematic, if not chaotic, results.

The second point of commonality is a re-conceptualization of the nature of geographical scale itself as an arena, hierarchy, and product of capitalist social relations (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011, 233). Capitalist production mechanisms, in their various forms, promote and accelerate spatial transformations, constantly destroying and reshaping the space with the intrusion of new social values and identities. This process is in a constant state of evolution, in parallel with small- or large-scale social “implosion-explosions” and “agglomeration-peripheralizations”. As globalization intensified this process horizontally, each scenario (namely “implosion-explosion” and “agglomeration-peripheralization”) responded

differently, depending on its socio-spatial context, making a generalized conceptualization and interpretation almost impossible: “The geographical scales cannot be understood in isolation from one another, as mutually exclusive or additive containers; rather they constitute deeply intertwined moments and levels of a single worldwide sociospatial totality”(Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011).

Third, most scholars recognize that the re-territorialisation which has occurred under market-globalization is deeply embedded in the processes of planetary urbanization. Both planetary urbanization and market-globalization can be understood as evolving towards an ever-greater acceleration of the circulation of various kinds of flows, including capital, labor, value, products, energy, etc. It has been argued that this process parallels the processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation “through which social relations are being increasingly detached and disembodied from places and territories on sub-global geographical scales [...] Globalization is conceived here as a re-territorialisation of both socioeconomic and political-institutional spaces that unfolds simultaneously upon multiple, superimposed geographical scales” (Brenner 1999). For this reason, scholars can no longer conceive of spatial organization in the ways that it did before the recognition of a planetary urbanization dynamic.

The urban-rural divide is one of many oppositional concepts that was previously understood as binary and in conflict, but which was nonetheless deeply rooted in the imaginaries of many individual people, as well as institutions, embodying an extremely weak reflection on the social-spatial transformation and organization, is viewed to be far from appropriate and draws serious critiques and discussions. Although a consensus on the definition is still elusive, a conceptualization is emerging within a common understanding of current market-globalization and form-shifting urbanization processes. The spread of global urbanization can no longer be viewed exclusively as quantitative flows within supporting networks that cover vast amounts of territory, but instead as “genuinely planetary forms of urbanization in which a densely if unevenly urbanized fabric of socio-spatial and political-economic interconnectivity is at once stretched, thickened and continually re-differentiated across places, territories and scales, throughout the space of the entire globe” (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011, 237). These shifts – including social-spatial, organizational, political – resulting from the qualitative transformation can neither be appropriately catalogued nor characterized by the boundaries provided by the previous scholars. “The urban is not simply a quantitative expansion of city populations or an outwards extension of inherited metropolitan jurisdictional boundaries, but has entailed a qualitative *reconstitution* of the urban itself in which a host of inherited spatial oppositions—for instance, city/suburb; urban/rural; core/periphery; North/South;

society/nature—are being fundamentally rearticulated, if not superseded entirely” (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011, 237).

In light of the perspectives presented above, instead of understanding the rural as an isolated socio-spatial area or as an opposite to the urban (a highly inappropriate view within the context of contemporary planetary urbanization), this research does not obey to the tenets of the previously dogmatic urban-rural divide. In the era of planetary urbanization, the rural is a significant spatial object within spatial transformations, primarily led by – as well as reacted and responded to – different forms of capitalist circulation and accumulation. This research will not limit its focus to the relative flows of capitalist accumulation within the networks to which they connect, but will also be mindful of qualitative transformations within the rural, including local actions within global agendas, the intrusion of alien values, conflicts and shifts in power dynamics among others. The rural is not just a supplier of raw goods and labor for the urban, but a subject of equal importance to the urban, already inscribed in new forms of urbanization process, long before we could correctly interpret its presence there.

### **1.3 Challenges to Rural Urbanization across Various Nation Contexts**

Rural development has come into greater and greater focus – including as locus for criticism – within the analysis of urbanization and globalization processes, leading to an increasing recognition of the inappropriateness of inherited urban theory and its reflections on urban planning practices across various national contexts. Many countries share a similar development trajectory in the urbanization process from urban development to urban-rural integrated development. For instance, Britain made the transition in the 1980s (Yali Li 2013), at which point the journey towards urbanization had merely begun in China (where the analogous turning point only occurred in the 2000s). However, this seemingly smooth process was actually one of constantly shifting requirements and visions for the future of rural areas, directed by a myriad of urbanization and globalization agendas, resulting in huge socio-spatial problems, conflicts and development challenges, each embedded in its distinct geographic and cultural context. Despite these distinctions, most rural transformations confronted analogous problems sooner or later, making it possible, with the help of a unified theoretical framework, to glean valuable lessons from those countries which began this transformative phase earlier than others.

### 1.3.1 Germany

As a developed country, Germany has faced numerous challenges in its peripheral rural areas, stemming from a shrinking population and declining regional socio-economic power (Wirth et al. 2016). Rural development in contemporary Germany is also affected by a multi-scaled framework, which includes domestic development policies and the schemes of the European Union (EU), as well as both formal and informal interventions into rural spaces.

Urbanization in Germany, similar to other nations, was guided by the previously prevalent conceptualization of a binary urban-rural relationship, which resulted in regional disparities. Market-oriented and growth-oriented development strategies, which emphasized urbanization and favored urban agglomeration, were ill-suited to the developmental conditions found at urban peripheries. In short, these growth-oriented economic systems produced new peripheries instead of alleviating existing issues (Wirth et al. 2016, 73).

In the context of both demographic and socio-economic decline in the urban peripheries, village renewal – which included the major tasks of settlement reconstruction and the renovation of the structural fabric of the villages – became official federal policy in 1977, and resulted in significant interventions in terms of rural development (Chigbu 2012). The “Dorferneuerung” was implemented after the unification of East and West Germany, aimed at benefiting the rural population as a whole. The main target was upgrading rural living standards with an implementation process characterized by an emphasis on public participation. Despite being a national policy, understandings of its effects differed among the various regions. For instance, in Thuringia, the government was convinced that “Dorferneuerung” was able to encourage socio-cultural development through an emphasis on local identification with the village, “engendering a self-help ethos” which could be sustained even after the new scheme ended. An analysis in Sachsen-Anhalt indicated that the new scheme contributed to “village identity” and “community spirit” by increasing comfortable and valuable village public places such as kindergartens, village halls, churchyards and meeting places. However, the Agriculture Ministry in Brandenburg took the “Dorferneuerung” as “part of an integrated rural development policy,” and believed that its promotion should take socio-economic initiatives into consideration. Similar beliefs were shared by the Ministry in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, which took the “Dorferneuerung” as “an important component of economic and social regeneration” (Wilson 1999b, 249, 250).

The 1993 Federal Planning Act stated the following planning goals for rural areas (in both the old and new Länder): in rural areas planning policy should seek to maintain population in order to support the existing settlement structure and to maintain an acceptable provision of basic services, even where the population is declining. Economic viability should be promoted through training and jobs, both in and outside agriculture. The multiple functions of rural areas (agriculture, forestry, housing, industry as well as recreation and tourism) should be supported and improved. Ecological functions must also be taken into account... (Source: Raumordnungsgesetz, 1993, articles 6 and 7, author's own emphases was added), (Wilson 1998, 247).

The re-introduction of important village functions and the encouragement of adequate living standards for the villagers did not create the basis for a strengthened rural culture, traditions, and features consistent with its unique rural society and lifestyle. Instead, it was the village community, formed by village citizens and a body of outside participants, who took the work of village renewal upon themselves, with support from the "Land Consolidation Act of Federal Republic of Germany (1994)" Chapters 2-3 (Chigbu 2012).

Domestic policies related to rural revitalization, either directly or indirectly, in Germany are consistently criticized for failing to reach the following objectives:

- Regional policy fails to achieve the goal of narrowing regional disparities as the requirements of the peripheral regions rarely matched the plans of regional development agenda, making them less effective than anticipated (Wirth et al. 2016).
- Rural identity loss was identified as a major threat (Chigbu 2012, 215). As urban populations also migrated toward those rural areas with good accessibility to urban agglomerations, they did not necessarily concur with the local spirit of the villages, and often actively involved themselves in rural development (or possibly acted against it): "Urban migrants are usually accused of contributing to difficulties in rural living. These difficulties range from distortions in cultural lifestyle to loss of rural identity to unrealistic economic lifestyles" (Chigbu 2012, 209). As such, serious challenges presented themselves in most attempts to stimulate rural attractiveness, re-establish rurality through than emphasis on culture and non-farming activities, and revitalize social-economic activities within rural areas (Chigbu 2012).

- The most visible benefit for the villages seem to have been improvements to the rural built environment. The new rural renewal policies, as well as other top-down planning schemes, failed to generate other opportunities (such as job openings), mostly because the funding system, a lack of flexibility, and the policies unto themselves ignored the differing requirements of the various regions: “The contribution of Dorferneuerung to wider rural development, and particularly to job creation, is more questionable. While it has provided short-term work for builders and ABM-workers, its contribution to longer-term job creation can only be indirect, and much depends upon the role of key village actors in the process, as well as upon the geographical location of villages and their attractiveness for investment”(Wilson 1999).

For these reasons, supplementary approaches were increasingly emphasized, leading to the unfolding of new experimental practices, especially actor-driven approaches. From the mezzo-level, regional structural policies from the 1980s, (characterized by a top-down approach) were supplemented by alternative bottom-up approaches, including regional development concepts and regional management agencies, tasked with encouraging the greater involvement of other sectors, and emphasizing regional hotspots and key projects. Simultaneously, this process introduced “endogenous or self-contained” regional development strategies for rural areas, with the major target of increasing job opportunities in rural areas by accentuating existing resources and human capital within a region, as well as exploiting potential opportunities through small and medium-sized businesses (Wirth et al. 2016, 65).

In the similar vein, the vital significance of innovative cooperative approaches was also recognized: “the protection and management of villages against urbanization is of value (with positive social and economic consequences) but this is only sustainable if rural people are proud of their rurality and have a collective vision that is rural based”(Chigbu 2012, 223).

Zooming out to a broader regional (as well as more recent) perspective, German rural transformation has also been affected by the EU’s rural development policies. For example, one of the most complicated and controversial regulations for EU members, the “Common Agriculture Policy” declares that “the common market shall extend to agriculture and trade in agriculture products”. This policy is adjusted regularly, to account for differences in implementation and national context. In accordance with the “EU 2020 Strategy,” the “Rural Development Policy” has set a goal of smart, sustainable, and inclusive economic development with high employment (Paul 2014): “The EU rural development policy seeks to valorise regional

assets with the aim of enhancing living standards and economic diversification and competitiveness” (Zasada and Piorr 2015, 82).

The RD policy is complex, reflecting a decision-making process that runs through multiple levels – EU, regional, and individual participants each have a say – which can lead to serious local differences. The major objectives for the development funding are diversification, the encouragement of tourist activities and village renewal. According to Zasada and Piorr, looking at both the vast area covered by the policy and the cost-sharing plan between the EU and the beneficiary rural areas, the success of these types of initiatives rests on the participation of potential funding recipients, including local farmers and stakeholders, etc. That being said, different actors are significant for different objectives. For instance, local and regional stakeholders (and public authorities) are more decisive in promoting tourism development and village renewal, where they “show a stronger responsiveness to framework conditions, especially to the rural community characteristics, indicating the effect of substantial political targeting”. However, the actions of external actors (such as stakeholders and government authorities) had little relevance to the success of measures that exclusively targeted farmers as beneficiaries: “decision-making for measure participation is rather depending on the situation of the individual farmer and their inherent role, knowledge, motivation, community embeddedness and experience with the policy measure” (Zasada and Piorr 2015, 92).

In summary, the planning structure of contemporary Germany is highly decentralized at all levels of the political hierarchy, from the EU to the municipal to even the applicant level: “Spatial planning is in accordance with the German constitution (Article 75, No. 4), a policy area with only framework competencies for the Federation” (Chigbu 2012, 212). Village renewal in Germany, consisting of the integration of rural development as a component of spatial development, is implemented at the municipal level. However, as rural development is not included as a compulsory component of overall planning frameworks, it is only partially reflected at the EU, federal, and the regional/municipal levels. This discrepancy is visible in the respective funding ratios, where the EU support runs to 50%, federal support at 25%, and 25% is supplied by the municipalities and regional governments. The funding mainly supports the development of job opportunities, agricultural development, as well as upgrading infrastructure, the environment, the local ecology, as well as culture and rural social life. Furthermore, the process of rural renewal is not limited to formal structures, as it often proceeds through the informal planning channels, creating its own dynamics (Chigbu 2012, 212).

### 1.3.2 Britain

After more than two hundred years of urbanization, Britain has become a highly urbanized country, but one where the differences between urban and rural areas remain enormous, both in terms of infrastructure and public services (Yali Li 2013). In part, this is due to the considerable romanticism with which British people imbue their image of the countryside, ultimately prohibiting further development, insofar as “the emotional concern has been heightened through the abiding impression that the landscape is destined to experience even more disfigurement than has so far occurred” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, 19). Although such a long history and intimate attachment to the countryside has led to some extreme views from scholars who uncompromisingly insist that countryside development has destroyed the rural landscape and the meaning contained therein, two major changes, over the course of the past centuries, have enforced rural urbanization: agrarian capitalism (maintained in part through the British class system and directed by economic development agendas), and the intrusion of urban values in conflict with rural interests (Cherry and Rogers 1996).

Rural development in Britain has been further complicated by the relationships between institutions, organizations, and individuals, among other social entities, as have the possible benefits entangled within them. Depending on the historical moment (and the political ideology of the day), the countryside was alternatively on or off the institutional radar. At certain times, industrial development and urban problems were considered to be the most critical issues (such as in the inter-war period and in the 1960s), the countryside was marginalized by public policy. At other times, when issues like food production and environmental protection were of prime import (such as in the years after the Second World War and again in the 1980s and early 1990s), public policy concern shifted to the countryside, making it a central political priority. Similarly, protectionist and utilitarian concerns in turn took center stage, as political parties strove to have their moments. However, more recently, the perspective towards the countryside has shifted once again, with a new eagerness to diversify the rural economy, although struggles remain as attempts are restrained by development restrictions (Cherry and Rogers 1996).

Rural development is also influenced by global cultural movements that affect attitudes and beliefs, and impact local policies regarding conservation and development. Of course, globalization trends cannot be ignored: The countryside is in flux. The future of the English and Welsh countryside is now intimately bound up with decisions made not only in Brussels about "European" agriculture but also in boardrooms across the developed world, as they considered their investments in Britain (Cherry and Rogers 1996, 4). Gradually, rural areas, rather than

being on the periphery of the new economy, have become the economic and social focus, with a major assist from information systems, computers and biotechnology (Cherry and Rogers 1996).

Rural policy, aimed at promoted rural development or aiding the rural economy, has also constantly shifted in accordance with the changing priorities and political will of the time. The most influential aspects of the first wave of Development Plans were the rural policies which encouraged conservation, thereby necessitating the protection of landscapes and the separation of towns from the countryside; and which contained requirements within the rural settlement patterns to concentrate on services and resources. However, in practice, these two demands (conservation and an emphasis on services and resources) supported each other, both in implementation and in focus. Firstly, they both encouraged intensive housing development, employment opportunities, services and social facilities; secondly, they both encouraged the rehousing of the rural population from small villages that were about to lose their public services due to cutbacks; and thirdly, both were interested in distributing the villages into different categories to guide new development plan according to both environmental quality and service capacity (Cherry and Rogers 1996, 159). Since the 1950s and 1960s, a considerable amount of land has been rezoned, much of which represents a net loss of rural land: “The 1960s sustained, and in some years exceeded the high annual national building rates already established...villages and small towns became targets for housing development. The saving of agricultural land was still paramount on the strategic planning agenda—though it would be increasingly asked why, as agricultural productivity soared” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, 170).

Thus, rural urbanization in Britain was considerably more expansive than one would expect, as “for many of the remaining rural residents, private wealth effectively insulates them from such problems [the sustainability of small-scale communities] so that the countryside has become not a place from which people wish to escape but rather one which attracts more and more each year” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, 155). Cherry and Rogers continue, “It is not just a question of increasing pressures upon agriculture nor even just the threat of urbanization. Rather there is an acceptance, if sometimes unwilling, that the countryside has many legitimate claimants, not least from the urban population. New housing and new jobs, nature conservation and landscape, farm pluriactivity, recreational access and diversification are all common-place elements in the countryside of the 1990s” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, 176). Nevertheless, no matter the perspective, “the commitment to self-help and voluntary action which is at the heart of the [policy] approach appears very much in line with the image of the rural community held in the minds of many newcomers to rural areas” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, 155).

There is a strong trust in the idea that State control, exercised through a rational utilization of resources, has a greater efficiency and effectiveness than the wasteful private market system – although its application to rural areas has resulted in precisely the opposite. The 1993 planning policy for agriculture and forestry provides a clear delineation of the major changes in the past 40 years, as “state-centred farming policy, unequivocally focused upon food production and automatically equated with countryside care, had become a more market-based system linked to a broader-based rural economy in which so-called ‘CARE’ (countryside, amenity, recreation, environment) goods are specifically rewarded”(Cherry and Rogers 1996, 93). Similar shifts were also observed in land-use planning, including population distribution and settlement planning: “It became the task to iron out all manner of imperfections and inconsistencies in the market from land use to spatial patterns of distribution. This determination would apply to the question of the location of population and the spread of settlements” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, 157). These hierarchical functional arrangements which organized the distribution of people, raw goods, and products was based on a network of market towns of varying sizes and functions, which underwent dramatic changes as time wore on: “The twentieth century threw up many distortions of this pattern, including sustained outmigration from certain rural areas, some new population growth in residential fringes, a breakdown of isolation in some districts and a heightening of remoteness in others”(Cherry and Rogers 1996, 157). Local communities also showed resistance to the state's role in community development, as local groups contested government policies, including a new housing estate implementation plan and the possibility of losing village schools, challenging the simplistic application of the planners’ policy objectives: “At the grander, national scale the period saw a major turnaround in the whole attitude towards State involvement...By the 1980s these growing doubts had led to very significant retrenchment in State involvement and its partial replacement by the orthodoxy of the free market and self-help philosophies” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, 139).

It is important to mention that these substantial interventions in rural areas were supported by the widespread development of transportation networks, especially for the automobile, as well as by advances in technology in other fields, such as in information technology.

Based on this newfound access to transportation, the number of other public-sector facilities, such as schools and hospitals, decreased in post-1950s rural Britain, leaving some rural residents with access to even fewer opportunities and activities, except through increasingly dominant car-based daily commuting. In so doing, accessibility became a particular, although not exclusive, goal for the British Government, as it strove to achieve greater social inclusion and

social justice (Farrington and Farrington 2005, 2). It was also recognized as a significant challenge within the rural context. Within the confines of the policy, normative approaches to increasing accessibility relied on the improvement of mobility opportunities. After the fact, however, it became clear that without integrated support systems working hand in hand, accessibility is not sufficient as a singular solution to social justice issues resulted from contemporary development conceptualizations (Farrington and Farrington 2005), though it is no doubt a component.

To push this contemplation further, rural deprivation was identified as a constant threat to rural areas throughout the 1970s to 1990s, and yet, the problem remained unsolved. Orthodox rural planning methods were mostly concerned with housing, job opportunities, transport, and services, all of which indicates that these particular issues had been identified as problem areas in rural development. However, on those same terms, the solutions proposed within the government rural development policy were problematic for the following reasons: 1) Policies merely targeted the phenomena rather than the root cause; 2) rural development programs were affected by the broader and ideologically problematic effects of privatization, which left rural areas vulnerable, despite short-term safeguards; 3) rural problems are deeply rooted in the nature of contemporary society; 4) certain problems are constantly reproduced as time goes on, with new generations of young people, with the aging process, with low-income in-migration, with changing economic and policy conditions (Clope 1993). Rural development policy neither solved nor even alleviated decades of persistent rural deprivation.

It has been argued that rural areas per se are one of the more significant policy areas to be further elucidated, especially the incorrect assessment of rural problems, the efforts to revise policy failures, as well as exploring the various problematic experiences of rural lifestyles, social constructions, the sense of belonging to the rural community, interrelationships of political power and the expectations inherent in a rural lifestyle (Clope 1993). Such an analysis brings with it the critical question of who belongs to the rural community, a question which lies at the core of further reflection: "Is it anyone who has a 'feel' for the countryside and is strongly motivated to pursue a rural lifestyle? Is it anyone who would like to come and spend money in newly diversified rural businesses, including wide-ranging groups of tourists and leisure seekers? Is it anyone who has the means to buy their way into restricted housing market, bringing with them an economic and sometimes social vitality? Finally, is it anyone who is local (however defined)?" (Clope 1993, 119,120) According to Clock, the answer could be yes, but only in cases where rural lifestyles are accepted and practices that threaten culture/nature are cast aside.

### 1.3.3 Japan

Due to a low birth rate, an aging population, and out-immigrant of the younger generation, “rural communities in Japan have suffered from significant depopulation and economic downturn in the post-war years ” (Assmann 2015, 2) leading to the decline of the rural economy and to various efforts to enhance and reconstruct rural communities. After the Second World War, rural Japan experienced profound changes, swinging from overpopulation to depopulation in about 30 years. A series of policies were applied by the Japanese government to support and revitalize the agricultural economy in rural areas, which has promoted the diversification of rural economic structures and demographic structure, the modernization of infrastructure and the improvement of the rural built environment. However, these approaches have failed to effectively stem the loss of the rural labor force, the aging population, the abandonment of agricultural land and the lack of succession in the learning of traditional techniques (X. Yang 2016).

The third National General Development Plan, implemented in 1973, focused on settlements in particular, and was aimed at improving local attractiveness for people from urban areas, resulting in communities dependent on governmental aid and its administrative presence. Meanwhile, the government started to take an interest in community revitalization. The most influential project was a national movement named “Isson Ippin/One Village One Product (OVOP)” which began in the late 1960s in Dafen County and was then applied nationwide in the 1980s (Fujimoto 1992; L. Zhao 2004; W. Zhao and Chen 2007; P. He 2015). It also had an international influence, which, by 2009, sparked the participation of as many as 104 countries in this movement in various forms (P. He 2015). OVOP is a movement independent of the government, with an alternative leadership effort coming from within the local community, which encourages local industrialization or the creation of tangible products. However, with the engagement of the government in the movement, the revitalization projects shifted towards non-industrial activities, particularly the development of local specialties, symposia, and the promotion of local events. Moreover, those with substantial influence were focused on the market, administration (government) and community, whereas the attention of the OVOP leadership was limited to the administrative area (Fujimoto 1992, 12). The fourth National General Development Plan (1988) was confronted with a rapidly aging population, and a major discrepancy between rich and poor, an exploding urban population who lived in cities where land prices had exponentially. Instead of solving these challenges individually, the plan aimed at decentralization and independence, proposing the “Exchange Network System” which was supposed to “defuse the growing concentration of power, resources and decision-making represented by Tokyo. The centralization of Tokyo is a source of frustration and problems to

rural areas as well as to other regions such as Kansai and Kyushu. Tokyo is seen as a "black hole" of finance" (Fujimoto 1992, 12). The Hometown Renewal Program (Furusato Souseit) was among the approaches implemented to encourage communities to think independently about how to revitalize themselves, under an unofficial motto of "the community thinks and the government supports"(Fujimoto 1992, 13). As such, a diverse set of approaches was practiced in an experimental fashion.

The crucial impetus of the OVOP movement was not to merely develop an agricultural product, but rather to attract attention and a willingness to purchase, to participate and to share. For that reason, symbols and messages became vital throughout the whole process of community revitalization. "The identity of a community - whether held by residents or imputed by outsiders, is an integral part of what the community is. When a community is producing something, especially to enhance its sense of place, it's important that the product be identified with the place from where it came. Or the reverse can occur: a place gets identified by the product "(Fujimoto 1992, 15,16).

One of the major conclusions to be derived from the OVOP movement is that local practice should not be limited to a local area, but must instead apply beyond the confines of its prefecture to an entire region (Fujimoto 1992; L. Zhao 2004; W. Zhao and Chen 2007; P. He 2015). Furthermore, the projects were enhanced by a decentralized approach to power, which stimulated local initiatives, creatively formed community awareness and actively included the participation of all related actors (P. He 2015).

The consideration of the OVOP included here cannot be limited to its achievements, but will emphasize four other aspects that are easily confused: "1) Community revitalization is about harnessing the creative energy of people than about making a things; 2) It is about building community spirit more than about making money; 3) Communities that succeed in revitalizing themselves, seek to combine their human and natural resources in new, more effective way; 4) Community development and regional development complement each other"(Fujimoto 1992, 17-19).

Looking in detail, the loss of the younger labor force, migrating out of rural areas in Japan, was accelerated by the development of an integrated urban industrial economy that reached into rural areas and affected agricultural households. In the last century, the vast number of job opportunities being created were industrial in nature; the limited local positions in forestry and

farming were less interesting to the younger generation (Knight 1994), which led to a continual downsizing of the rural population with seemingly irreversible results. However, the conflict between urban and rural began to abate as a younger generation once again became interested in rural life, as shown in the White Paper of the Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructures, Transport, and Tourism (2014) which documented an increasing interest of younger people in their 30s and 40s in relocated to rural areas (Assmann 2015, 150).

Some of these highly motivated migrants have high levels of education and gave up well-paying permanent jobs in elite companies such as Sony or Toyota; they are graduates of first-class universities all over Japan. They have decided to abandon lifelong employment for a better work-life balance, in order to engage in activities that reach out to the “people,” or because they felt that despite their solid paychecks, the work has no long-term perspective. Driven by a strong urge to pursue a lifestyle that made sense for them personally and for the local community, these migrants opted for a voluntary move to set up their own enterprises, implement their ideas, contribute to local revitalization and achieve self-realization (Assmann 2015, 150).

#### **1.3.4 Common Concerns**

Despite the fact that the various strains of research on rural revitalization within urbanization and globalization processes are embedded in different national contexts, and that the academic discussions have concentrated on different conflicts, some common concerns emerge in the conversation about rural development sustainability.

##### **■ Deficiencies of a “Top-down” Policy**

Local development is increasingly affected by a global development agenda that is explicitly or implicitly directed by growth, market, and capital-oriented development, which can be seen in the unequal production of space (reflected in the continuing existence of spatial deprivation and central-periphery differentiation), and in the discordance within larger transnational programs between local needs and the development schemes created to solve them. Even in national/regional development policy programs which contain a clear recognition of contemporary circumstances and have set a goal of reconciling urban-rural development and encouraging rural revitalization, the goal remains elusive. For that reason, an emphasis on innovative approaches which integrate relevant actors have become a valuable alternative in the search for solutions. Local inhabitants, particularly those living on urban peripheries, must be motivated to act, in order to find a development dynamic that encourages decentralization. As

such, actor-driven cooperative approaches, especially in terms of local development, must be explored, practiced, and theorized.

### ■ **A Diversified Rural Economy**

The deterioration of rural areas is a common phenomenon in a vast number of regions, both in developed and developing countries. As we have seen in the examples listed above, the decline of the rural economy can hardly be solved by simply improving the built environment in rural regions. The diversity of functions, populations, requirements, opportunities, conflicts, etc. require and accentuate the need for more diverse economic sector growth, not limited to agriculture.

In Britain, as early as the 1980s, specific attempts were made to promote environmentally-friendly agriculture, while also encouraging and assisting farmers in the diversification of their activities away from food production towards other uses of their land, with particular funding available to support this rural development under the Farm Diversification Grant Scheme (Cherry and Rogers 1996, 107,117).

At almost the same time, the Japanese government promoted a national policy to diversify both the rural economy and the country's population structure, becoming engaged in the renowned independent OVOP movement, which lasted nearly 30 years, ending in 2009 (P. He 2015).

In Germany, the diversification of the rural economy was also valued and emphasized by various policies, and funding has been made available at the EU, national, regional and local level to support relevant initiatives (Wilson 1999; Chigbu 2012; Paul 2014; Zasada and Piorr 2015).

### ■ **Trends of In-migrants of Younger Population**

In Germany, Britain, and Japan, a younger generation (in their 20s, 30s and 40s) is becoming, once again, interested in a rural lifestyle. Though different in their expectations and understanding of their rural regions, this trend is a significant factor, and cannot be overlooked in terms of possible conceptions for the future of rural regions. Among those individuals who return to rural regions, one must account for speculators interested in rural development, individuals interested in tourism/leisure development and agricultural production, individuals with deep roots and emotional connections to the rural, and people with little idea of the rural except for poverty, who expect to realize their own self-value through the rural. The newly arrived younger population is a fresh start for rural renewal, but the risks remain, with ultimate

success depending on their understanding of the rural, their willingness and expectations, shifts in power dynamics and participatory mechanisms, as well the different national contexts.

### ■ **Job Opportunities: Temporary vs. Long-term**

In decades past, depopulation has been one component responsible for the economic and socio-cultural depression of rural areas. Caused by a myriad of forces, including a downturn in fertility, natural disasters, industrial development, and neoliberal dynamics, depopulation is a reality not limited to the global north but also extends into the global south. This trend has led to a similar response in the various countries suffering from this challenge, namely an innovative effort to create more job opportunities in rural areas in order to maintain a certain level of population stability, necessary to make rural renewal possible. Unfortunately, the job opportunities created in rural areas are most often temporary rather than long-term positions.

Taking for example the “Dorferneuerung”, the most influential rural policy in Germany, which covered the whole rural area of the country for approximately forty years. This village renewal project was severely criticized over time, as a renewal approach transferred directly from West Germany, which was aimed in particular, at downsizing the rural workforce.

Rural development in Japan was in a similar limbo: “The principal challenges of population shrinkage coincide[d] with an increase of neoliberal changes in the workplace (after the burst of the bubble around 1990 and the global financial crisis in 2008) that include the rise of part-time employment and short-term work contracts. In 2010, the overall rate of part-time employees in Japan amounted to 34.3 percent, compared to 16.4 percent in 1985 and 32.6 percent in 2005.” This phenomenon caused social conflicts and led to greater social exclusion and marginalization, especially among short-term migrant works in rural communities (Assmann 2015, 22).

### ■ **New actor-driven forces and the rural for whom?**

The final and most trenchant concern is the question of rural development for whom. As the engagement of new actors has been increasingly witnessed inspiring and affecting dynamics of emerging rural development from among varying contexts, local transformations are no longer limited to local dwellers’ efforts.

In Germany, culture groups, academic professionals, architects, outdoor enthusiasts, urban dwellers, and private investors among others have become new actors motivating rural revitalization to address local education, communication of community, upgrades of

infrastructure, development of tourism, outdoor activity, agriculture production and so on (Huang et al. 2017; Faber and Oswalt 2013). Similar trends have also been observed in Japan. Some younger generation, high-ranking university graduates, as well as former company employees and even foreign labor, have engaged in rural development to pursue various objectives (Assmann 2015). These objectives include local education, community activity, alternative lifestyles and agriculture production among others. Likewise, some urban residents have always been interested in rural areas in Britain and now, some of the younger people tend to participate in rural transformation.

These new actors with fresh initiatives and resources are valuable in connecting the dwindling rural networks with broader networks, thereby stimulating local economies and stabilizing demographic structures. Notwithstanding positive impacts, these transformations motivated by the new actors, whether nuanced or complex, have further complicated future visions and development objectives for local plans with limited resources. Thus, potential inclusion and exclusion for various stakeholders has become crucial issues. The essential question is who should benefit from these transformations? This includes how to set priority with regard to multiple objectives and what should be respected, or preserved, during the shift?

As early as the 1970s, Lefebvre argued that space, completely invisible so as to maintain its neutrality, its empty milieu, a passively existing object, was undeniably under the direction of exploitation and domination, participating in the production of goods, products and commodities, as well as in the consumption of those products. In that vein, he emphatically asked the questions, “In whose service? To what end? Who uses it and why? This is the central question. The answer: it becomes a site [lieu] and a context for the reproduction of the (social) relations of production, and primarily for the (social) relations of capitalist production” (Lefebvre 2009, 185). He continues, “three screens mask the tragedy of becoming: the everyday, Logic (the logical), and institutionalized Knowledge, considered as received wisdom; an indispensable and perhaps even beneficial error” (Lefebvre 2009, 245).

This central question has been discussed for decades and is still deeply rooted in the core conflicts inherent to spatial interventions: “the crucial issue therefore, is not that of policing boundaries between “nature” and “culture” but rather, of taking responsibility for how our inevitable interventions in nature proceed—along what lines, with what consequences and to whose benefit” (Braun and Castree 2005, 32).

The depth of the division is reflected in the way extremist in each culture view the other. To some critical and intolerant academics, practitioners are narrow-minded philistines and at the best naïve reformists, part of a system of exploitation of which they are largely unaware, while technical scientists, for their part, serve their own class, producing technical scientists, for their part, serve their own class, producing technologies which are not for the poor. Administrators and scientists rarely ask the key question-who gains, and who loses? (Chambers 1983, 37)

Beyond that, the easily overlooked fact that individuals – facing the same opportunities – have distinctive mobilities must be taken seriously as a fundamental facet of this question: “In a sense, at the end of all the spectra are those who are both doing the moving and the communicating and who are in some way in a position of control in relation to it...These are the groups who are really, in a sense, in charge of time-space compression; who can effectively use it and turn it to advantage; whose power and influence it very definitely increases” (Massey 2012, 79). If time-space compression resulting from urbanization and globalization can be viewed through a more social evolved lens, then the development of a politics of mobility and accessibility becomes possible. From that perspective, it is not the unequal distribution of resources that is problematic, but the difference in mobility and in the control over mobility among individuals which reflects and emphasizes power: “It is that the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people. Differential mobility can weaken the leverage of the already weak... It also strengthens its hand against struggling local economies the world over as they compete for the favor of some investment”(Massey 2012, 80).

## **1.4 Evolving Approaches in Debates in Space Transformation**

One of the key objectives of the research is to critically analyze the sustainability of rural development dynamics caused by university engaged rural practices. Three evolving theoretical lenses, consisting of sustainable development theory, resilient community, and actor-network theory, were therefore employed to guide the fieldwork and data analysis.

### **1.4.1 Contextualizing Sustainable Development Approaches**

Sustainable development approaches refer to intervention approaches that are in accordance with the requirements of sustainability. Although the concept of “sustainability” gained popularity towards the end of the last century, its genesis is dated back to the 1970s. The term “sustained” was first used in natural resource management, and traced to the sustained-yield

forest management techniques introduced to cope with the danger of over-cutting forests in Germany in the nineteenth century. Then, Gifford Pinchot introduced the phrase to the United States. The term “sustainable development” was firstly found in the book named “Limits to Growth” published in 1972 (Wheeler and Beatley 2014b). It was not until the “Report on Global Environment and Development” proposed in 1987 that the concept of sustainable development was listed as an urgent development requirement for nations across the world. The critical issues proposed in the report were essential human needs and the limitation on natural environment regarding sustainability. The strategic imperatives are addressed as 1) reviving growth, 2) changing the quality of growth, 3) meeting essential human needs, 4) ensuring a sustainable level of population, 5) conserving and enhancing the resource base, 6) reorienting technology and managing risk, 7) merging environment and economics in decision making (Brundtland Commission 1987, 41). Since then the expression started to be employed in various fields, including planning, environmental policy, and businesses among others and led to different discussions on its connotations. One of the major debates on the concept in the 1990s was whether the concept should be based on rights or on needs, which were respectively related to the neo-liberal economic agendas and social consequences (Redclift 2005).

More recent debates mainly focused on three aspects, namely, the environment, equity, and economy. The main argument in this recent debate has been that, there is the need to maximize all these three value sets at once, rather than playing them off against one another. This requires interdisciplinary communications (Wheeler and Beatley 2014c, 9). A few scholars, have seriously questioned the recent focal issues on sustainability and emphasized that the dimensions should not be limited to ecological, social and economic aspects, but be expanded to include moral, ecological, social, economic, legal, technical and political issues (Pawłowski 2008).

Sustainability has also been conceptualized in different disciplines. Take urban planning for instance. City sustainability was once practically proposed as “a sustainable city is one in which the conditions under which I live make it possible that my children and the children of my children will live under the same condition”(Castells 2000, 118). And it was also defined by listing all the critical factors as “achieving a balance between the development of the urban areas and protection of the environment with an eye to equity in income, employment, shelter, basic services, social infrastructure and transportation in the urban areas”(Hiremath et al. 2013, 556).

Besides the lack of consensus on the conceptual meanings of the term, criticisms of the concept as a whole came in strongly. “Sustainable development” was criticized as the latest development catchphrase, which later led to a new paradigm of development, widely accepted, adopted, and embraced by organizations both formal and informal, while the core concept, as well as the indicators derived from the term, were not clearly interpreted. The concept was regarded as an umbrella concept that shaded so wide that it made it easily manipulated by political agendas. Its obvious deficiency could be found in the current incomplete perception of the problems of poverty and environmental degradation and the confusion about the role of economic growth and the concepts of sustainability and participation(Lélé 1991).

Notwithstanding the above shortcomings of the theory, it is incontestable that the emergence of the concept of sustainability provided a path-breaking perspective in the contemplation on human livelihood. All the other criticisms thus helped to shape it. In this study, the meaning of sustainability is drawn from its conceptualization in the infancy and on its application in the planning context. Therefore, the sustainable development approaches herein referred to planning intervention approaches that support the continuous meeting of human needs.

Sustainability is thus a function of how assets and capabilities are utilized, maintained and enhanced so as to preserve livelihoods. Environment sustainability concerns the external impact of livelihoods on other livelihoods; social sustainability concerns their internal capacity to withstand outside pressures...Social sustainability refers to whether a human unit (individual, household or family) can not only gain but also maintain an adequate and decent livelihood. This has two dimensions, one negative, and one positive. The negative dimension is reactive, coping with stress and shocks; and the positive dimension is proactive, enhancing and exercising capabilities in adapting to, exploiting and creating change, and in assuring continuity(Chambers and Conway 1992, 9, 10).

#### **1.4.2 Contextualizing Community Resilience**

Some scholars consider community resilience as a branch derived from sustainability and an indicator of social sustainability (Magis 2010). While some other scholars questioned the limitation of the utility of the contemporary dominant paradigm of sustainability that could only contribute to past, current and similar future (Davidson 2010), resilience theory provided other insights. Also, some scholars emphasized that sustainability be more in line with equilibrium whilst resilience took on more of the external varieties and adaptations (Norris et al. 2008; Davidson 2010).

The term “community resilience” as frequently discussed in the urban planning and sociology literatures is derived from the word “resilience”, first used in physical sciences to describe springs. It was later introduced to depict different phenomena in ecological communities in the 1970s and the 1980s (Community and Regional Resilience Institute 2013). The concept of “resilience” remained competitive as it went through decades of new interpretations. It was adopted in contrasting contexts even within the same discipline. The very first influential definition of “resilience” was found in the research of ecological systems which emphasized the adaptation of systems. It was used to reflect systems’ adaptation to extreme uncertainties or challenges through multiple approaches of innovation or transformation to its own attributes. “It does not require a precise capacity to predict the future, but only a qualitative capacity to devise systems that can absorb and accommodate future events in whatever unexpected form they may take” (Holling 1973, 21). Meanwhile, it was important to differentiate the system’s resilience from the system’s stability, because exploitation and conservation determine the stability while the release and reorganization determine resilience (Holling 1973, 1992). The supporters are many. “We have argued, as have others, that resilience is a process that leads to adaptation, not an outcome, not stability. We emphasized the likelihood that stress and crisis induce transient periods of dysfunction, but adopted wellness as the eventual outcome of interest, the manifestation of adaptation to an altered environment” (Norris et al. 2008, 144). “Resilience, measures the amount of change or disruption that is required to transform the maintenance of a system from one set of mutually reinforcing processes and structures to a different set of processes and structures...Robustness, on the other hand, emphasizes the cost-benefit trade-offs associated with systems designed to cope with uncertainty”(Anderies, Janssen, and Ostrom 2004, 18). “Good adaptation under extenuating circumstances; a recovery trajectory that returns to baseline functioning following a challenge(Butler, Morland, and Leskin 2007, 402)”.

Some other scholars defined resilience in terms of survival. “Resilience is the magnitude of disturbance that can be absorbed before a system changes”(Berkes, Folke, and Colding 2000). These originated from ecological studies. This kind of definition shared a sharp and legible criterion towards the judgment on resilience.

Besides, some scholars also applied the concept to describe the ability of social units to recover from future hazards or uncertainties. “The ability of social units to mitigate hazards, contain the effects of disasters when they occur, and carry out recovery activities in ways that minimize social disruption and mitigate the effects of future earthquakes” (Bruneau et al. 2003, 735).

There were also academic studies appealing for an interdisciplinary synthesis of the concept. “Resilience can only remain useful as a concept and as progressive practice if it is explicitly associated with the need to improve the life prospects of disadvantaged groups. This dimension is often lost in definitions of resilience drawn from engineering and ecology, but remains central to conceptualizations linked to social psychology. To improve the prospects of cities proactively (and reactively), there is a need to unify the insights from the multiple professions and disciplines that use ‘resilience’”(Vale 2014, 191).

Further extending the discussions to urban planning discipline that focused on a more specific definition of “resilience community”. The discussions remained fierce in regards to conceptual dimensions, application approaches, and possible manipulative objectives among others (Davidson 2010; Cretney 2014; Cretney and Bond 2014; Vale 2014).

“Community resilience, as defined herein, is the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise”(Magis 2010, 401).

“Community resilience is the capability to anticipate risk, limit impact, and bounce back rapidly through survival, adaptability, evolution, and growth in the face of turbulent change. This definition contains the core concepts identified above: resilience as an attribute, with adaptability at its core. It indicates the desired trajectory, and can enable communities to determine how resilient they are and to take actions to improve their resilience”(Community and Regional Resilience Institute 2013, 10).

“An integrative approach seated in the complex adaptive system and ecological understanding can incorporate the identification of explicit social strengths and connections to place, activated by agency and self-organizing”(Berkes and Ross 2013, 5).

Since there is no universally agreed definition of "community resilience" in the literature, this study tried to identify some underpinning features of this compelling concept and differentiate the contexts in which it is applied and developed. The contextualization of resilience was then directed towards critically examining “the structural factors towards and through which persons engage collectively in human agency” (Brown and Kulig 1996, 46). Therefore, the core elements of external challenges, internal adaptations, and survival were used to conceptualize “community resilience” in this study and applied in the analysis of this research:

- Resilience enables the community to adapt to challenges or changed contexts resulting from shifted external relationships both predictable and unpredictable. The key issue here is the changing conditions from outside. In this research, external shifts comprised changing urban-rural interactions, resources flows, and policy agendas among other external factors.
- The changes or challenges are not necessarily predetermined as negative effects but more appropriately understood as outside pressures/intervention forces that require shifts in community practices. The shifts require internal transformation or adjustment to new relationships.
- The most critical and tricky part of the definition was “survival or recovery”. It is relatively easy to judge in the natural sciences whether the subject is destroyed through the process or recovered with its function remained. However, in the social sciences and in this study in particular, although it was contextualized in the thought of a trajectory, but it was difficult to determine where to draw the line to determine whether there was a destruction and a recovery or not. In other words, how do you make a call for adaptive adjustments and transformations that respond to the new external interventions which are not substantial ones? For instance, if the adjustments affected a community in terms of defining what it was, such a community could be seen to have remained as it was but which in fact, had changed intrinsically. For instance, a village could remain as a fully functioning “rural community,” while its previous social relationships and human-resource interactions among other vital factors become untraceable in urbanization. Therefore, at least some genuine internal features of a community existence should be retained rather than merely functioning as a living space. Thus in this research, the criteria for “survival” in terms of rural community includes the local demographic composition, the community rights and empowerment, territorial unity, collectivity, and the level of residents’ participation, etc.

### **1.4.3 An Extra Pair of Eyes: Actor-Network Theory (ANT)**

The criticism of sustainability became even more fierce in the past decades. Most of these criticisms focused on its applications, which always took economy as the priority and then the environment, whilst social cohesion was not given much attentions if not ignored. Some scholars argued that the urban sustainability framework was greatly influenced by the contemporary dominant development dynamic of neoliberalism (Baker 2007; Rogers 2007). The “greening capitalism” took little concern of social inclusion and exclusion and relied on the technocratic

approaches to “rationally” to manage and utilize environments. So many radical scholars moved beyond sustainability and searched for alternative approaches to decipher and trace the social links rather than re-applying social ingredient into the plate of sustainability (Braun 2005; Cook and Swyngedouw 2012).

The urban-rural system is not merely a complex machine that could continually follow the designed and “rational” rules. Though it is constantly affected and seemingly followed by the rules of capitalism, it also occasionally drags the whole game into utter darkness. It operates as “a constellation of entities, networks, and systems with their own logic and dynamics that are only ever partially visible and always emergent in their combinations”(Amin 2013, 206). It requires more practical science to look through parts and individual components instead of homogeneous theory and approaches to lead the formation of the urban as well as the rural conceptualized under various contexts. Networks and interrelations need to be highlighted, while a distinct advantage and progressiveness of the ANT is its focus on materialities in social-natural relations. Meanwhile, more importantly, the applicable approaches derived from the theory pioneered the analysis of such links. The approaches appropriately involved nonhuman actors, including buildings with their materials, infrastructural grids, energy forms, and weather systems among others, which are of great importance (Latour 2005; Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2012). However, they were ignored continuously for reasons of not being quantifiable.

The ANT defies simple definitions. It cannot be merely taken as an unorthodox strategy that abusively penetrated research of recent works. “ANT has been developed by students of science and technology, and its claim is that it is utterly impossible to understand what holds society together without reinjecting in its fabric the facts manufactured by natural and social sciences and artifacts designed by engineers” (Latour 1996, 370). It is neither technical networks designed by engineers to penetrate and virtualize the real world in terms of compulsorily defined connections among countless nodes, nor social networks of human actors, entities, and originations among others. The ANT aims at extending the dimensions of the network and the content to essences of societies and natures (Latour 1996, 369,370).

The ANT is extremely useful, on the one hand, it could exclude some seemingly important but ambiguous boundaries (e.g., big/small, outside/inside, far/close). On the other hand, it permits the studies to include formerly marginalized “actants”. Rather than shifting perspectives between global and local, the network application provides a view to linking the global and the local. “Instead of opposing the individual level to the mass, or agency to structure, we simply

follow how a given element becomes strategic through the number of connections it commands, and how it loses its importance when losing its connections” (Latour 1996b, 372).

Of great importance to this research is the fact that the ANT enabled the inclusion or combination of some significant and entangled issues such as applying social concepts, economic forces, political considerations, and even science applications without cautiously noticing their social contextualization (Latour 2007). It emphasizes the definition of the nodes in the network, configured as “actants” (Latour 1996b, 373) rather than as actors traditionally understood to mean the social concept of human figures in general. Despite criticisms of ANT not providing a satisfactory avenue for including actors with limited power, the theory still makes an important contribution to understanding relationships in development interventions through its inclusion of non-human actors in development actions (Callon 1999).

This research is rooted in the rural area, which means that it would inescapably face complex interfaces of institutional hierarchy, entrenched connections of collective resources, and intangible local essences among others. As such, ANT provides the most appropriate analytical and theoretical tools to depict this complicated network. This study thus employed the ANT as an efficient tool to map and decipher the rural transformation as much as possible. “In itself ANT is not a theory of action, no more than cartography is a theory on the shape of coastlines and deep sea ridges; it just qualifies what the observer should suppose in order for the coastlines to be recorded in their fine fractal patterns. Any shape is possible provided it is obsessively coded as longitude and latitude. Similarly, any association is possible provided it is obsessively coded as a heterogeneous association through translations (Latour 1996b, 374,375)”.

Besides, with its characteristic of repelling naturalizations, socialization, and textualization, as well as the differences circumscribed in between (Latour 1996b, 379), the ANT provides better chances to have a more in-depth recognition of exploratory practices and to analyze their effects in rural China. Therefore, the connectivity of the network in the rural transformation could be obtained in a more complete and precise sense, and the flows within the network could be identified, which would greatly contribute to evaluating the outcomes of the current exploratory spatial interventions. More importantly, this research focused on the changing development dynamics in rural areas formed by different external interventions. Therefore, the ANT could provide a sensitive extra pair of eyes to analyze these transformations.

## 1.5 Chapter Summary

The relationships among urbanization, capital accumulation, and space are entangled: no matter how capitalism itself is formed (conceptualized as capitalism or neo-capitalism), it has already “produced an abstract space” (Lefebvre 2009, 173), considering its impact on both domestic and global levels, enabled by capital flows and national politics. While through urbanization on an unprecedented scale it formulates and constantly produces space, from simply occupying space all the way to more direct philosophical and “rational” interventions.

Capitalist urbanization processes continue to produce cores and peripheries and new urban fabrics. The urban and rural as part of space, no matter how it is conceptualized, is not able to escape its fundamental attributes as productive forces, with products that contain use value and exchange value under capitalist forms of urbanization. Despite the prevalent and longstanding conceptual framework that saw urban and rural as a binary, a new perspective has developed which argues that planetary urbanization has blurred the boundaries between rural and urban, and that as such, new conceptualizations are needed, and research avenues adjusted accordingly.

A huge discrepancy still exists between countries formerly categorized as developing and developed, or more recently (in an increasingly prevalent conceptualization), as the Global North and the Global South, whereby the process of planetary urbanization and globalization has led to the development of a horizontal rather than a vertical transnational structure, limited to individual countries. In this sense, local development cannot be discussed within a single national hierarchy, while ignoring the broader influences of global agendas. The conflicts, dilemmas, and struggles of rural development have always been shared across regional and global contexts, even if they may unfold in different ways in different contexts.

Therefore, the literature on rural development in Germany, Britain, and Japan, which documents earlier urbanization experiences, must be studied so that valuable insights can be incorporated into the rural renewal plans in countries like China, whose rural development began much later, and is therefore working within a different global and urbanizing context. The shared challenges and concerns can be synthesized into a common discourse, focused on decreasing the deficiencies of “top-down” policies, increasing diversity in rural economies, understanding new trends, such as the return migration of a younger population back to rural areas, and the increase in temporary job opportunities rather than long-term ones, and the finally – most fundamental question of all - for whom does the rural exist, and for whose benefit.

Apart from critical discourses on theorizing urban and rural and the understanding of new challenges and initiatives emerging in rural urbanization, evolving theory tools regarding viewing spatial transformations are also discussed in this chapter as it is vital for demystifying dynamics and changes resulted from physical shifts. Thus, theories of sustainable development, (community) resilience and actor-network theory are selected, discussed and contextualized because of their relevance of this study.

## **Chapter 2: Tracing Rural Urbanization from 1978-2018 and its Problematic Legacy in China**

Rural urbanization in China proceeded slowly in the first thirty decades of the commencement of People's Republic of China: a situation which is not consistent with the industrialization process. The continuing industry-agriculture price scissors significantly contributed to the development of heavy industry. Meanwhile, the urbanization was slow, the urban population even decreased at the beginning of the 1960s and during the Cultural Revolution [Figure 2]. However, the RO in 1978, actively connected China with the western world, while the globalization process further emphasized horizontal development. The RO explicitly or implicitly promoted the urbanization process in China and resulted in extreme "Time-Space Compression" (Harvey 1991), especially after the reform of the tax system in 1994. The rapid urbanization enhanced uneven rural-urban development (Fei 1993) and resulted in severe socio-spatial problems and difficulties in the late 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Examples of such problems are urban sprawl and the real estate bubble. Whilst the urban challenges arising out of rural urbanization generated increased interest and attention, the rural issues until recently were ignored. The rural region in China just like elsewhere in the world was conceptualized as a space for agricultural production except that in China, the human-land relationship was stronger because of the household registration system. In China, rural areas were regarded as social communities where people relate to each other and where each person is born to possess legally a farmland and a homestead and is thus expected to practice a farm-based livelihood. Peoples' daily lives were linked closely to local work patterns, until a few decades ago when people started to leave their hometowns and change their occupations from farming to temporary urban workers. Consequently, farmlands started to be abandoned, rural houses saw an improvement with non-local materials whilst the villagers' self-identities were disdained both internally by the rural residents themselves and externally by the urban society and the gentrified urban culture. Most importantly, these modifications penetrated deeply through the superficial physical space into the rural social structures.



Committee of the National People's Congress 1958). In addition to selling a certain percentage of agricultural products at a price stipulated by the state to support the daily consumption of the urban areas, the rural lives were considered to be self-sufficient and sustainable in terms of rural livelihoods.

Rural livelihoods, themselves, comprise one or more often several, activities. These can include cultivation, herding, hunting, gathering, reciprocal or wage labor, trading and hawking, artisanal work such as weaving and carving, processing, providing services in transport, fetching and carrying and the like, begging and theft. They variously provide food, cash and other goods to satisfy a wide variety of human needs. Some of these outputs are consumed immediately, and others go into short or long-term stores, to be consumed later to be invested in other assets (Chambers and Conway 1992, 8)

However, the economic strategy promoted by the RO since 1978 started to substantially affect rural development and contribute to the acceleration of urbanization (B. Ye et al. 2011) [Table 1]. At the beginning, the rural was not spatially affected by the urban expansion. Internal restructuring was the main melody that lasted for the following decades regarding rural development, while the urbanization paradigm shifted towards a more spatio-social compression. It was not until 1984, when the township enterprises were legally accepted (CPC Central Committee 1984), that the rural area started to experience both external urban spatial expansion pressure on rural farmlands and internal rural industrialization. This resulted in more and more collective farmlands being occupied by urban constructions and rural factories. In addition, the decentralization of the national financial management system in 1994 (The State Council 1993) directly led to the local government gradually and increasingly relying on the income from land transactions due to the reduction in industry tax revenues. These reforms deepened urban housing reforms and accelerated housing construction in 1998 (The State Council 1998). Meanwhile, the introduction of a tendentious housing policy which officially replaced social/free housing distribution with monetary distribution, and in principle prohibited the renting of newly constructed houses while thoroughly enforcing the housing provident fund system among other strategies made land for housing a rare urban-rural resource. Consequently, the rural spatial compression further accelerated (Cai 2000). This expansion was so rapid [Figure 4, Figure 5] that the central government responded by promulgating a rigid land policy which set a limit of 18 billion mu (equals to 1.2 million km<sup>2</sup>) for permanent cultivated land in 2006 (National People's Representative Congress 2006). This required a new strategy of urban-rural development, leading to the spatial shrinkage of rural areas as rural construction

lands were transformed into urban construction lands. Thereby, the speed of urban expansion was restrained and gradually slowed down.

Table 1 Numbers and scales of cities and towns between 1978-2010

City Types in terms of Population	Number of Cities in 1978	Number of cities in 2010
<b>cities</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>658</b>
above 10 million	0	6
5 million-10 million	2	10
3 million-5 million	2	21
1 million-3 million	25	103
500 thousand-1 million	35	138
Below 500 thousand	129	380
<b>Town</b>	<b>2173</b>	<b>19410</b>

Note: the data is based on the sixth national census

Source: [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-03/16/content\\_2640075.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-03/16/content_2640075.htm) (last access: 10.2017)

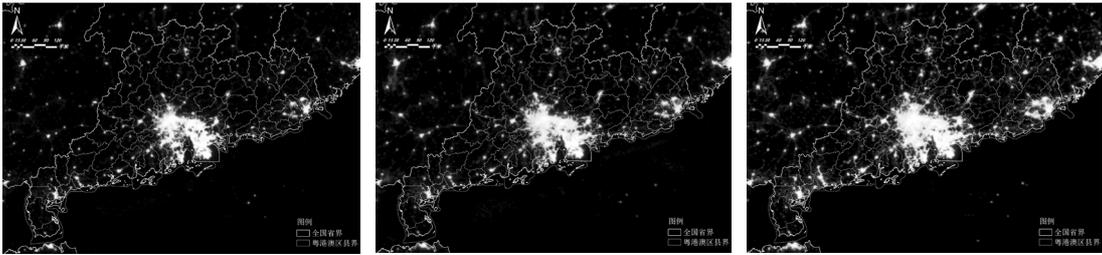


Figure 4 Rapid urban sprawl in the Pearl River Delta: 2003, 2008, 2013

Source: The US DMSP/OLS nighttime light data

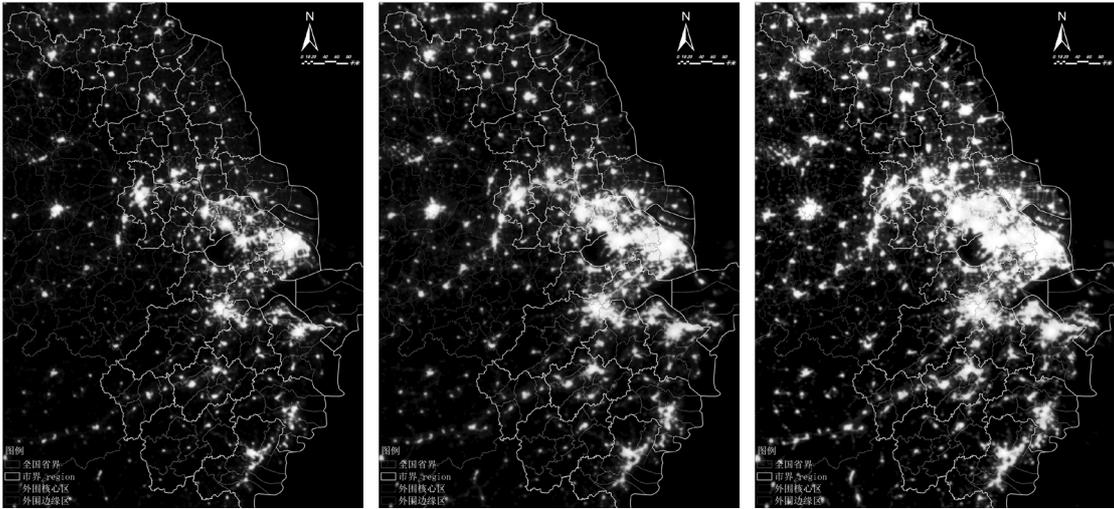


Figure 5 Rapid urban sprawl in the Yangtze River Delta: 2003, 2008, and 2013

Source: The US DMSP/OLS nighttime light data

Between 1994 and 2008, the economic boom in China and rapid urbanization contributed to basic industrialization, infrastructural development and wealth creation on the one hand and to “creative destruction” (Harvey 2007; Brenner, Wachsmuth, and Madden 2012) of the rural region on the other hand through a series of national policies on land, the economy and household registration. Based on the traditional understanding, urbanization is the result of economic development rather than the cause (Harvey 1991), as experienced by many countries in the global north. The logic behind this kind of urbanization has been understood as the reproduction of “space products” promoted by capital circuits. However, the urbanization process in China, Turkey, and other countries has been described as a contradiction to this traditional understanding (Harvey 2015). Typical Chinese urbanization is largely associated with meeting domestic needs, promoting economic development and leaving the “middle-income-trap”. Thus, urbanization is literally delivered as an official task of economic development from top-down. This form of urbanization which is promoted through public finance and government subsidies is distinct from urbanization in the global north (Q. Li, Chen, and Liu 2012).

## **2.2 The Problematic Nature of the Previous Rural Urbanization**

### **2.2.1 The Detached Rural Livelihoods and Unsustainable Social Structure**

The Blue Book of Cities in China: Report of City Competiveness released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2012 suggested that past rural urbanization patterns were unsustainable. The main problems were identified as incomplete urbanization of population and excessive urbanization of space. These were predicted to intensify if government continued to promote urbanization through spatial urban expansion (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2012). Rural urbanization based on capital circulation resulted in social problems of detached rural livelihoods and unsustainable social structure. Statistics showed that in 2013, the proportion of the non-agricultural household population was below 40%, which was nearly 15% lower than the officially announced Chinese urbanization rate. It indicated that a substantial amount of the urban working population, over 262 million, had not obtained the urban household registration, commonly known as hukou (International Eurasian Academy of Sciences et al. 2014). However, the gap between the urban residents and the urban population with household registration showed no sign of narrowing down [Figure 6]. People without urban household registration contributed considerably to the increased national urbanization rate as a whole. Unfortunately however, they had been practically ruled out, willingly or unwillingly, of the urban system and

disconnected from the urban social welfare system. These group of people were popularly known as NOMINGGONG (urban peasant workers).

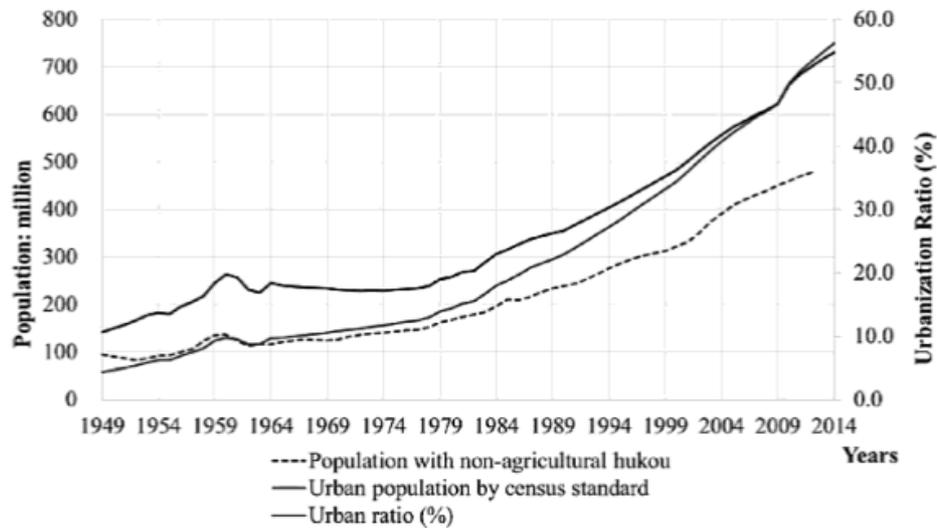


Figure 6 Chinese population with non-agriculture hukou, urban population, and urban ratio, 1949-2014  
Source: (L. Zhang, LeGates, and Zhao 2016, 16)

In terms of the housing support system, which is essential for everyday life, NONGMINGGONG received little support from this system, even though they had worked in the city for a long time. According to the Report of China's Migrant Population Development in 2011 (National Population and Family Planning Commission of China 2011), few NONMINGGONG who worked for over fifteen years enjoyed the social housing support provided by the government. Only 27% of them could afford to buy urban apartments of their own whilst the majority (75.2%) lived in rented spaces provided by private owners which indicated an instable living condition [Table 2].

Table 2 The housing conditions for rural migrants in the urban areas, classified by length of residence (Based on the samples of five major cities in China)

	≤ 1 year	2~3 year	4~5 year	6~9 year	10~14 year	≥15 year	Total
Rent Employer's Housing	13.1%	9.2%	8.2%	8.1%	9.8%	9.0%	10.1%
Rent Private Housing	74.6%	80.6%	81.2%	77.1%	71.3%	61.3%	75.2%
Purchased Housing	2.5%	4.9%	7.2%	12.4%	16.4%	27.0%	9.3%
Free Housing Provided by Employer	9.5%	4.8%	2.9%	1.5%	1.6%	2.0%	4.7%
Social Housing Provided by	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%

Government							
Others	0.3%	0.5%	0.5%	0.9%	1.0%	0.8%	0.6%

Source: *The Report on China's Migrant Population Development 2011*(National Population and Family Planning Commission of China 2011)

The unstable living conditions and unaffordable housing in the urban areas also resulted in long time separation between NONGMINGGONG and their families. The statistics of 2012 showed that only 3375 (20%) out of 16336 NONGMINGGONG, who worked away from their hometowns could bring their families with them, whilst the rest of them had to left their families behind in the hometown [Table 3]. Therefore, there was a considerable number of NONGMINGGONG who could not genuinely connect to the urban system and, at the same time, suffered from long-term separation from their families and rural social networks. Significant social gaps occurred between them and the urban populations. This inevitably created significant social problems, which led to negative development dynamics in urbanization.

Table 3 Statistics of NONGMINGGONG 2008-2012 (Unit: 10 thousand people)

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Total population of NONGMINGGONG	22542	22978	24223	25278	26261
1. NONGMINGGONG away from home	14041	14533	15335	25863	16336
(1) NONGMINGGONG left home alone	11182	11567	12264	12584	12961
(2) NONGMINGGONG left with whole family	2859	2966	3071	3279	3375
2. Local NONGMINGGONG	8501	8445	8888	9415	9925

Source: *The City Status of China 2014-2015*(International Eurasian Academy of Sciences et al. 2014)

Besides, the age structure of NONGMINGGONG also raised serious concerns over the rural urbanization. Figure 7 showed that NONGMINGGONG mainly consisted of young adults, 80% of whom were aged between 21-50 years old. About 32% of them were very young, with ages ranging between 21-30 years old. The figures indicated that most of the rural labor resource flew towards urban areas, which led to another severe challenge in rural areas because of the composition of the rural resident population. The remaining population in the rural area were largely labelled as the “61,38,70 rural troops”. This label locally means that the contemporary rural demographic structure mainly comprised of kids who could still enjoy the children’s festival on the first day of June, women who celebrate their international holiday on the eighth day of March, and the elderly aged above 70. This phenomenon has been constantly criticized for its negative influences on rural development ( Yansui Liu et al. 2010).

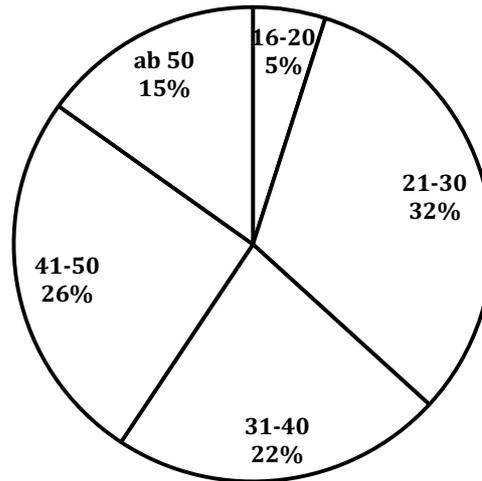


Figure 7 The age structure of NONGMINGGONG in 2012

Source: *The City Status of China 2014-2015* (International Eurasian Academy of Sciences et al. 2014) with Author's own photograph

Around 2010, a shortage of NONGMINGGONG started to occur in eastern developed urban areas in China. However, this did not mean that the social challenges that resulted from the flowing rural migrants reduced, rather, they persisted. Many scholars argued that the “Lewis Turning Point” was about to happen in China (Cai Fang 2007; Zhao Min and Chen Chen 2013; Chen Chen 2014) based on the nationwide evidence of a decrease of the labor force and an increase of dependent population around 2012. Therefore, they argued that the demographic dividends emanating from rural urbanization would gradually disappear. However, the turning point did not stop the increase of rural migrants. Therefore, a new strategy was proposed in the National Plan for a New-type Urbanization (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China [CPC] and the State Council 2014) after three years of compilation. It suggested settling the flowing rural population by sharing basic urban public services and improving the settlements of previous rural migrants. Accordingly, the financial cost of this movement was considerable. It was estimated that 40-50 trillion CNY (about 5.2-6.5 trillion EUR), about one-third of which was from the public expenditure, would be invested to support 400 million migrant workers' settlements in the cities and towns (China National Development and Reform Commission 2012; Academy of Social Sciences 2014).

### 2.2.2 Ubiquitously Ill-matched Rural Space and Lifestyle

There was growing recognition that the differences in urban and rural built environments and public services were responsible for the rural development predicament and the continuously widening urban-rural gap (D. T. Yang 1999; Ming and Zhao 2004; Sicular et al. 2007). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the central government started to intervene in rural spatial

planning directly. The State Council launched a large-scale program of the SNC since 2005. The strategy was to construct rural houses (apartments) through integrating rural construction lands so that public services could be delivered and additional construction land spared. It was a new approach aimed at maintaining the urbanization rate while improving the rural built environment and encouraging rural transformation. The expectation was that the problems created by the previous binary rural-urban development policy could be gradually settled. Although this appeared a logical expectation in urban development, spaces that were ill-matched with rural lifestyle were created in rural areas. Therefore, rather than releasing the rural development pressure, this strategy ended up increasingly problematizing rural urbanization.

The SNC program was designed to focus on delivering public services to the rural areas through an efficient method while at the same time improving the existing built-environment. Accordingly, (dilapidate) rural houses [Figure 8] were simply demolished without any consideration, and new rural apartments assembled and parallelly lined up [Figure 9]. The previous diversities emanating from human-environment interactions, development histories, and local cultures were destroyed. The differences in the new rural apartments could only be observed in terms of building styles. Although some of the new village projects incorporated traditional Chinese residential elements, these were not necessarily local elements [Figure 10]. Meanwhile, some inappropriate public spaces were also introduced to the new villages to encourage daily communication, social activities, and healthy lifestyles, which unfortunately had no relevance to the rural residents. Some unexpected activities were frequently observed every day in the new villages. For instance, the rural elderliness still used to wash things in the water near their houses, so they always took the designed landscape ponds as a replacement of rivers/brooks after moving into new rural apartments. The behaviors might as well be forbidden, but there was no natural water space close to their neighborhood anymore [Figure 11]. Besides, which were even worse situations, some public open spaces created for fulfilling the living requirements of the urban lifestyles were introduced into the rural regions. Not surprisingly, few rural residents actually used and needed them [Figure 12]. Therefore, the ubiquitously ill-matched rural space and lifestyle is another issue that was constantly criticized regarding rural development priorities and public investment efficiency.



*Figure 8 Typical shabby rural houses*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*



*Figure 9 An example of rural apartments without any local features*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*



*Figure 10 Rural apartments constructed with traditional Chinese residential elements*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*



*Figure 11 An old lady washing in the landscape pond near her home  
Source: Author's photograph (2016)*



*Figure 12 Examples of public spaces inappropriately introduced to the rural regions  
Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

However, the unexpected outcomes were not only resulted from the insufficient recognition of rural context by governmental authorities but the conflicts among top-down development agendas, globalization requirements, and everyday needs in the rural areas. For instance, in order to compete for top-down funding for rural transformation, the priority for the local

authorities might be the implementation of some visible projects rather than fulfill the villagers' everyday needs. Furthermore, there was another important, if not essential, intention beyond the large-scale rural transformation program, which was to spare and transfer additional rural construction land quota for the urban construction and to integrate farmlands for development of modern agriculture (Song, Chen, and Jiang 2010; Qu et al. 2011; Long 2014; Yurui Li et al. 2014). This was confirmed by the research of Y. Ye and LeGates (2013) who proposed "The framework of the orderly flow of production factors between the urban and rural areas". They argued that the SNV precisely promoted the transfer of additional rural construction land quota and the development of large-scale agriculture. It was supported by private investments and resulted in more farmers being put out of work and cheaper rural labors flowing towards the urban regions.

### **2.2.3 Rural Construction directed by the Urban Intervention Approaches**

For a considerable time, the rural spatial structure was shaped according to human-environment interactions (narrowly understood as Fengshui), including water resources and other natural restrictions. This was analogous to an organic growing process reflecting the local context. However, the contemporary rural transformation has been increasingly affected by continuously changing external factors resulting from the urbanization process and even the globalization agendas. Therefore, the unprecedented and direct spatial interventions towards rural areas were started by the authorities while the planning approaches remained unclear. Unfortunately, the urban planning methods regarding resources use and space organization were applied by many professionals in various design and planning institutions. Meanwhile, the officially approved planning process and required planning documents, which followed an urban development formula [Figure 13], were also used to supervise the rural transformation. Government authorized planning documents, including instructions, planning strategies, and maps served as guidelines. This resulted in creating homogeneity in the countryside just as in the urban. More disturbingly, these planning documents were implemented by specialists who were perfectly familiar with urban but not rural conditions, rendering these technical documents unadaptable for rural development.

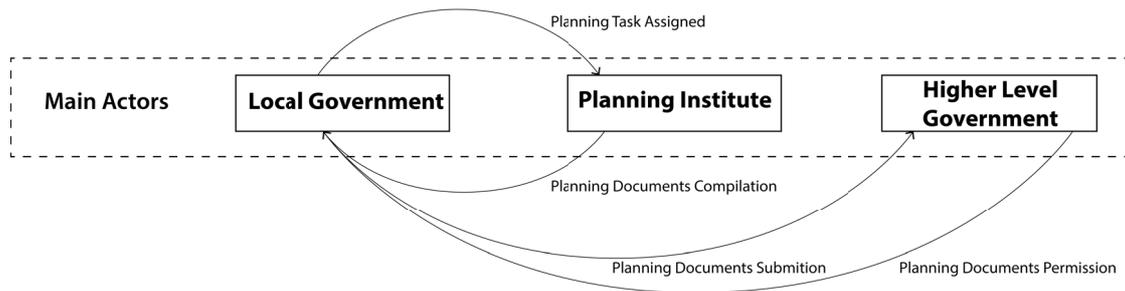


Figure 13 The regular process of urban spatial interventions

Source: Huang and Akaateba 2017

Therefore, the romanticized blueprints from the SNV which guided the rural transformation were partially responsible for the failure to achieve the rural revitalization. While the direct transfer of the urban spatial intervention approaches to the rural context should also “take the credit” for the current rural dilemma (Housing and Urban-Rural Development Department 2015).

### 2.3 Critical Resources and Unpredictable Potentials regarding Rural Transformation

Rural transformation and the development opportunities resulted from it are tightly close to the most crucial resource in regard to the current development paradigm and policies, which is the construction land. It makes the rural intervention entangled with intricate interests related to the construction land while not limited to it. The rural land used to be important to the stability of the rural communities and the regime as well for it guaranteed farmers with houses to live and farmlands to cultivate and prevented farmers from becoming refugees (Rozelle et al. 1999), while now the land remained the critical resource for urbanization.

Table 4 Land distributions in China 2015

Category	Type	Area( 10.000ha)	Ownership
Construction Land *	Urban	916.1	State-owned
	Facilities (for Traffic, water, mining)	716.4	State-owned
	Rural	2226.8	Collective-owned
	Total	3859.3	
Agriculture Land*	Farmland	14932.2	Collective-owned
	Forest	25299.2	Mixed Ownership**

	Meadows	21942.1	Mixed Ownership**
	Water	2372.2	State-owned
	Total	64545.7	
* Data of Mainland People's Republic of China Excluding Unutilized land like Desert, Mountain, Wasteland.			
** Land Owned by the State with Exceptionality according to the Constitution			

Source: *The Land and Resource Bulletin 2016*

<http://www.mlr.gov.cn/sjpd/gtzygb/201704/P020170428532821702501.pdf>

*The National Urban Land Use Data Summary Results 2016*

[http://www.xinhuanet.com/expo/2016-12/29/c\\_129425408.htm?\\_t\\_t\\_t=0.46552993287332356](http://www.xinhuanet.com/expo/2016-12/29/c_129425408.htm?_t_t_t=0.46552993287332356)

China has enjoyed a name of state land ownership, but actually, only the lands for urban construction, facilities and industrial, and mining sites are state-owned, while the vast rural construction lands and farmlands are collectively owned by villagers. According to the Ministry of Land and Resources Bulletin 2016, the construction land totaled 38.293 million hectares at the end of 2015, accounting for about 4% of the total land area. Only 9.161 million hectares of the construction land were urban construction lands, of which 46.5% were cities, and 53.5% were towns. The villagers collectively owned 22.268 million hectares of rural construction land, in addition to nearly 150 million hectares of farmlands collectively owned by the villagers [Table 4]. The rural population is allowed to use their lands to practice farming and to build their houses under certain regulations but without time limits. Therefore, subtracting collectively owned lands, the state-owned land in China is not that large comparing to the other countries which claimed the private land ownership. For instance, the United States whose federal, state, and local government-owned about 42% of the land in total (M. Li 2009).

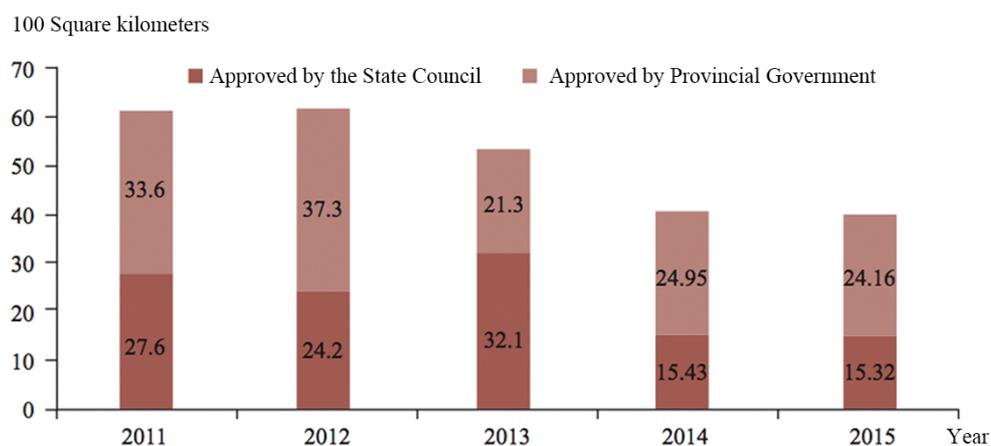


Figure 14 Annually approved construction land in China between 2011-2015

Source: *China Land and Resources Bulletin 2015 (PRC's Ministry of Land and Resources 2016)*

More importantly, the increase of urban construction land approved by both of the state council and the provincial government has been decreasing annually according to the statistics [Figure 14] (PRC’s Ministry of Land and Resources 2009, 2016). Previously, exactly before 2006, rural construction land and rural constructions were not on the radar of local authorities; even though the rapid land expansion greatly promoted urbanization at the time. However, in 2006, the Chinese central government required a minimum of 1.2 million square kilometers of permanently cultivated land to guarantee food and ecology safety. This directly led to the introduction of an annual “urban construction land quota”, which has to be approved by the central and the provincial government before construction land could be distributed to local authorities. The quota system also intended to shift the urbanization paradigm which relied on the extensive growth of urban construction land to intensive urban development [Figure 15]. It was however in both practical and theoretical terms impossible to shift the urbanization paradigm overnight. This was because the local authorities were compelled to, by all means, transfer rural construction land to urban construction land to keep the local development. It was until 2012 that the transfer of construction land quota from rural to urban decreased following a shift in Central government attitude towards rural development (Chen 2015; Chen et al. 2016). Hence, a new phase of rural transformation was officially started.

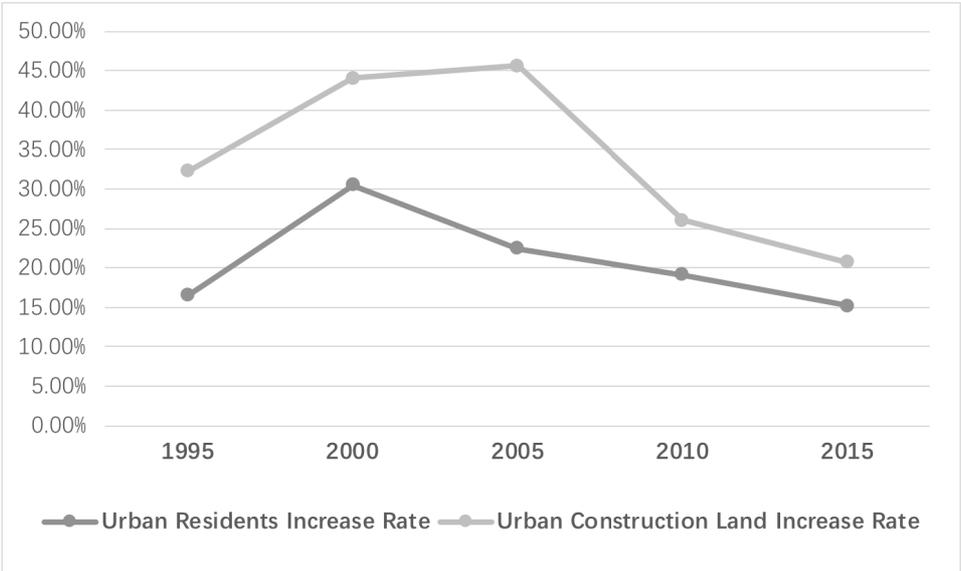


Figure 15 Increase-rate comparison between urban residents and urban construction land  
 Source: The Ministry of National Resource of the People’s Republic of China, The National Bureau of Statistics

To sum up, rural transformation was not only closely related to rural development but to the urbanization process as a whole through the linkage of land and all the other development factors and opportunities related to it. Whilst the urban construction land has been strictly

controlled since 2006, rural land regulations are becoming flexible in recent years due to supportive policies regarding rural development. This flexibility in rural land regulations present various opportunities for rural areas. More and more actors within or outside of existing administrative frameworks are thus being attracted to these opportunities formally or informally with different expectations. Land, therefore, constitutes a crucial resource in the process of urbanization with both opportunities and risks.

## **2.4 Chapter Summary**

In the process of urbanization, resources and capitals were attracted to the urban areas for a higher return on investment, which made the role of the urban hard to be challenged by the rural(Lefebvre 2003). Rural areas in China were considered to be sites of subsidiary resource provision for a long time. Cheap resources, primarily referring to land and labor force, in rural areas continually flowed towards the urban areas while the resource circumfluence from the urban to the rural was very weak for various reasons. Besides, the urbanization also affected the rural spaces. It led to the spatial shrinkage of rural areas as rural farmlands, and rural construction lands were successively transformed into urban construction lands. It was not until 2012 that the rural spatial compression resulted from urbanization gradually weakened. As for the rural per se, it experienced different development phases, including exploring appropriate organization forms regarding agriculture production, low-end industrial sprawl, planned demolitions, the “Socialist New Villages”, and currently the “Beautiful Villages Construction”. While this research identified 1) the detached rural livelihoods and unsustainable social structure, 2) ubiquitously ill-matched rural space and lifestyle, and 3) rural construction directed by the urban intervention approaches the primary problematic legacy regarding rural urbanization. They are also the most critical challenges facing by current rural revitalization.

The current rural urbanization trend is to search for new alternatives to use rural resources, improve rural livelihoods, promote rural revitalization, and achieve sustainable development dynamics from a respected perspective. It attracts various actors and brings enormous opportunities. However, it does shift the rights and benefits attached to land. Therefore, potential risks is exist.

Admittedly, the urban-rural relationship and its conceptualization are perpetually shifting under constantly forming and reforming of capital forms, global organization forms, and human recognition among other influential factors. While even back to the traditional recognition of

urbanization, which was defined by demographic proportion, agriculture, as well as the rural areas will remain as a crucial role in Chinese national economy no matter what kind of time-space compression was experienced before. The land bonus attached to the rural household gradually becomes noticeable, which, to a certain extent, maintains the rural population (M. Zhao, You, and Chen 2015). The rural areas will chronically take the role of the population “reservoir” and risk “stabilizer” that holds a considerable amount of “urban-rural amphibian” rural population(Wen 2015). It is also consistent with the prediction of the United Nations. The statistics showed that the percentage urban in China is not likely to reach above 80% in the near future as in island countries like Great Britain and Japan, and in migrant countries like America, Australia, and New Zealand among others even though China has experienced an unpredictably rapid urbanization in the past decades. The urbanization rate is most likely to stay stable around 70% as in many traditional farming countries on the European continent like Germany and Italy (World Urbanization Prospects, UN, <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/>).

### **Chapter 3: Shifting Trends in National Policies Concerning Rural Urbanization and Initiatives by New Actors**

From a huge agriculture nation to a rapidly urbanized country, the time-space compression that China experienced and still experiencing is incontestably affected by the considerable impacts of globalization. However, the domestic policies are the ones that directly shaped and re-shaped the urban-rural relationships, rural spaces, rural socio-economic structure, and rural lifestyles, among which land policy and economic policy together with the household policy are the most relevant and influential policies concerning rural development [Figure 16]. In addition to the regular policies, new driven forces of rural development also introduced by the central government through new approaches since the administrative attitudes towards rural has shifted since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The SNV program launched in 2005, as well as the BVC firstly practiced in 2008, are considered to be the first policies that directly intervened the spatial transformation in the rural regions at a large scale. The romanticized image proposed by the directly spatial intervention policies, though might base on a lovely intention of improving the rural built environment and narrowing down the urban-rural gap also resulted in the entire changes of human-space interactions, the rural tontines, and living habits among other significant aspects.

Besides, it is more than worth to discuss further the implementation procedures of these top-down policies to elaborate the varieties in the administrative hierarchy because even in a highly centralized country like China, the bottom-up influences are not only possible but even common for various reasons. To understand the major policy context and the conditional flexibility of the policies will greatly contribute to the case study and comparative analysis.

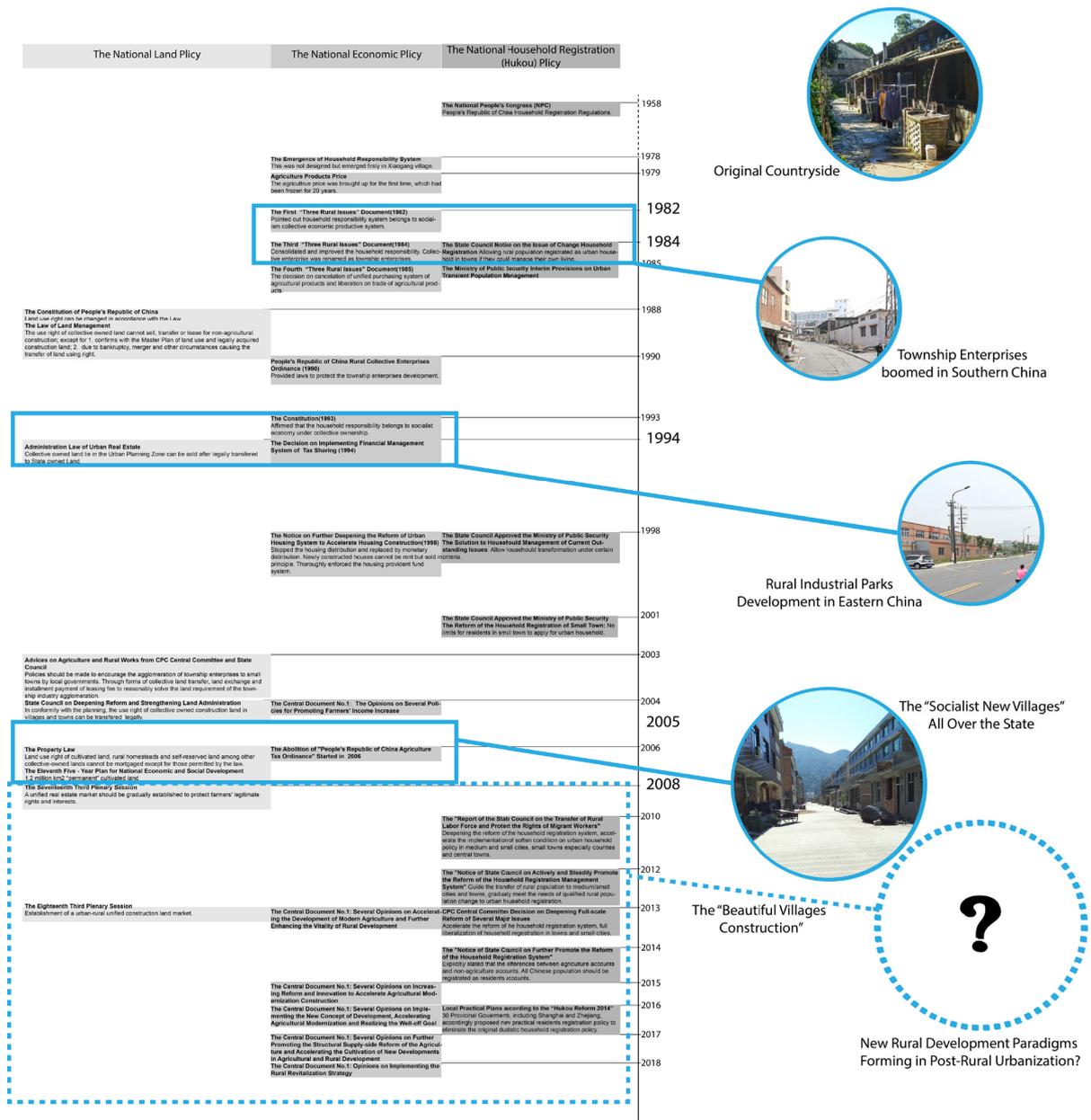


Figure 16 Shifted national policies regarding critical phases of rural urbanization in China and a reflection on rural changes  
 Source: Author's construction

### 3.1 The National Land Policy

The national land policy is the most fundamental and critical one. The constitution states that the socialist public ownership of land in China includes two types of ownership: the ownership of the people as a whole (i.e., the state) and the collective ownership of all the farmers. The urban population have very few rights on land, a "loss" which is indirectly "compensated" through "bonuses" attached to urban household registration including public services and social

welfare. While the land right of the rural population included the using right and conditionally rent right, but no free trading right. Not until 1988 that the legal transfer of land use right, specifically referred to the collective land, was approved under certain condition by the national land policy. The following are a list of relevant laws and policies on national land in China in related to rural development.

***People's Republic of China Constitutional Amendment (National People's Representative Congress 1988)***

The Amendment changed the item of “Any organization and individual cannot occupy, trade, rent or in other forms illegally transfer the land” to “Any organization and individual cannot occupy, trade or in other forms illegally transfer the land, the land use right can be changed in accordance with the Law.”

***The Law of Land Management (National People's Representative Congress Standing Committee 1988)***

The use right of collective-owned land can be transferred according to other regulations issued by the State Council. The collective land ownership can be sold to the State for the public interests.

***The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of the Urban Real Estate (National People's Representative Congress Standing Committee 1994)***

The use right of collective-owned land laid in the Urban Planning Zone can be sold after the land ownership has legally transferred to state-owned land.

***The Advice on Well Proceed Agriculture and Rural Works (CPC Central Committee and State Council 2003)***

Local governments should make policies to encourage the assemblage of township enterprises towards small towns. To reasonably solve the land requirement of the township industry agglomeration through the collective-owned land transfer, land exchange, and installment payment leasing fee.

***A Decision of State Council on Deepening Reform and Strengthening Land Administration (State Council 2004)***

Rural construction land must be in accordance with the land use plan regulated by the master plans and village and town plans. It should also be included in the annual plan of land use. Any behaviors of occupying rural land must be approved by legal procedures. It is forbidden to

change the collective-owned land to state-owned land by "village reconstruction" or other means. Rural collective economic organizations are prohibited from selling and leasing the collective-owned land for non-agricultural development illegally.

***The Eleventh Five - Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (National People's Representative Congress 2006c)***

1.8 billion mu (equals to 1.2 million km<sup>2</sup>) of cultivated land will be a legally binding indicator in the next five years, which is an insurmountable red line.

***The Property Law of the People's Republic of China (National People's Representative Congress 2006a)***

Land use right of cultivated land, rural homesteads and self-reserved land among other collective-owned lands cannot be mortgaged except for those permitted by the law. Rural collective economic organizations are forbidden to sell illegally and lease the collective-owned land for non-agricultural development.

***The Eighteenth Third Plenary Session (CPC Central Committee 2013)***

Establish a unified urban-rural construction land market. In line with the premise of planning and use control, operating construction lands belonged to the rural collectives are allowed to be transferred, leased, and shared. The implementation regulation is the same as state-owned land: "equal entry to the land market, same rights and same price."

The land policy shifts in the past decades showed two apparent tendencies: first, the restrictions on the rural land transfer, in general, gradually loosened throughout of the time; second, the urban expansion changed from compressing rural farmlands to rural construction lands. Though a unified urban-rural construction land market was proposed, the collective-owned construction land still needs to be sold to the state before entering into the land market. The changing trends of the land policy introduced and allowed more capital investment into the rural regions while the central government's attitudes towards rural land, especially rural construction land, remained cautious.

### **3.2 The National Economic Policy**

Unlike the national land policy, which has direct impacts on urban-rural space, the national economic policy affects urbanization through organizing production patterns and directing

resource and capital investment, and then it influences the social structures. The following are a list of relevant laws and policies on national economy in China in related to rural development.

***The Emerge of Household Responsibility System (Fewsmith 2009)***

The household responsibility system was not designed and implemented from top-down but started in Xiaogang Village where eighteen villagers took the initiative.

***The Decision on Several Issues for Speeding up Agricultural Development (Draft) (CPC Central Committee 1978)***

The reform of the national monopoly purchase and marketing policy which had been officially implemented since 1979 led to an increase in agricultural prices which had been frozen for 20 years.

***The Central Document No.1: The First "Three Rural Issues" Document (CPC Central Committee 1982)***

The document pointed out that the household responsibility system belongs to the socialist collective economic production system.

***The Central Document No.1 "The Notice on Rural Work in 1984": The Third "Three Rural Issues" Document (CPC Central Committee 1984)***

The document emphasized to consolidate and improve the household responsibility. Collective enterprises were renamed as township enterprises.

***The Central Document No.1 "Ten Policies on Further Actively Promoting Rural Economy": The Fourth "Three Rural Issues" Document (CPC Central Committee 1985)***

The document proposed the decision on the cancelation of the unified purchasing system of agricultural products and approved the free trade of agricultural products.

***People's Republic of China Rural Collective Enterprises Ordinance(State Council 1990)***

It provided laws to protect the township enterprises development.

***The Constitution (National People's Representative Congress 1993)***

The Constitution affirms that the household responsibility belongs to the socialist economy under the collective ownership. Villagers participating in rural collective economic organizations

have the right to operate the self-reserved plots and hills and family sideline businesses and raise livestock under the law.

***The Decision on Implementing Financial Management System of Tax Sharing (The State Council 1993)***

It promoted the reform on the tax system. The reform was to implement a tax-sharing financial management system in provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities directly under the administration of the Central Government and cities specifically designated in the state plan since 1994. This reform clarified the power division between the central government and local governments and increased tax sources for the central government.

***The Notice on Further Deepening the Reform of Urban Housing System to Accelerate Housing Construction (The State Council 1998)***

It officially proposed to stop the housing distribution and replace it by monetary distribution. Newly constructed houses cannot be rent but sold in principle. It thoroughly promoted the housing provident fund system.

***The Central Document No.1: The Opinions on Several Policies for Promoting Farmers' Income Increase (CPC Central Committee 2004)***

The document focused on the strategies and regulations to increase farmers' income.

***The Abolition of "People's Republic of China Agriculture Tax Ordinance" (National People's Representative Congress Standing Committee 2005)***

It officially abolished the agriculture tax since 2006.

***The Central Document No.1: Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Modern Agriculture and Further Enhancing the Vitality of Rural Development(CPC Central Committee and The State Council 2013)***

The document encouraged and supported contracted land to be transferred to large professional households, family farms, and farmer cooperatives. Among them, the concept of "family farm" appeared for the first time in the Central Document No. 1.

***The Central Document No.1: Several Opinions on Increasing Reform and Innovation to Accelerate Agricultural Modernization Construction (CPC Central Committee 2015)***

The document focused on building modern agriculture and accelerating the transformation of agricultural development methods.

***The Central Document No.1: Several Opinions on Implementing the New Concept of Development, Accelerating Agricultural Modernization and Realizing the Well-off Goal (CPC Central Committee and The State Council 2016)***

The document proposed to 1) improve agricultural quality, efficiency, and competitiveness; 2) strengthen resource conservation and ecological restoration; 3) promote the eco-friendly development of agriculture; 4) promote the integration of rural industries.

***The Central Document No.1: Several Opinions on Further Promoting the Structural Supply-side Reform of the Agricultural and Accelerating the Cultivation of New Developments in Agricultural and Rural Development (CPC Central Committee and The State Council 2017)***

***The Central Document No.1: Opinions on Implementing the Rural Revitalization Strategy (CPC Central Committee 2018)***

The policy shifts showed that the agriculture economy had been gradually weakened, which the industry-agriculture price scissors were no longer prime to the industrialization development (Wu Li 2010); Second, the central government was inclined to support agriculture development by the benefits from industry development since 2006. Third, the decentralized financial management system released huge pressure from the central government, while the local governments' burden was increased, which resulted in the local finance increasingly depending on the land transaction and different expectations of the central and local governments in rural urbanization afterward.

### **3.3 The Household Registration Policy**

Probably unlike many other nations in the world, the concept of rural is becoming competitive while the line between rural and urban remains quite obvious and clear in China till now because of the household registration policy, also known as *hukou* policy. The urban household registration and the rural household registration was recognized as the most influential element in the dualistic urban-rural policy. Different types of household registration led to the differences in social welfares, social responsibilities, rights over lands and so forth. It was a protective policy,

formerly aimed at guarantee the farmers' rights over lands in the previous agriculture society, which unfortunately resulted in the huge discrepancy between the rural and the urban, the polarized development, and irreversible social problems. This policy was one of the most denounced policies both abroad and domestically. It has been criticized the most for it represented the institutional discrimination and seriously affected the rural migrants' lives in urban and the urban-rural socioeconomic integration(Yue et al. 2013).

However, the trend of urbanization development in recent years increased the land value of rural areas. Due to the land rights attached to the rural household registration, it is almost impossible to transfer from the urban household registration to the rural household registration in recent years. While the transfer of the rural household registration to the urban household registration was hard decades ago, but the transfer is encouraged in the recent years by the central government as urbanization proceeded. The central government's determination of household registration reform was strong, especially after 2008. The reform on the household registration system was so imperative that new instructions were delivered from top-down almost annually. The following are a list of relevant laws and policies on household registration in China in related to rural development.

***The Report of the State Council on the Transfer of Rural Labor Force and Protect the Rights of Migrant Workers (National People's Representative Congress Standing Committee 2010)***

The report proposed to deepen the reform of the household registration system and accelerate the implementation of lowering thresholds of urban household registration policies in medium and small cities, and small towns, primarily referring to the counties and central cities.

***The Notice of State Council on Further Promote the Reform of the Household Registration System (State Council 2014)***

It explicitly stated to eliminate the differences between agriculture household accounts and non-agriculture household accounts. All Chinese population should be registered to the residents' household accounts.

***The Local Practical Plan According to the Household Registration Reform 2014 (National Development and Reform Commission 2016)***

Until the April of 2016, twenty-eight Provincial (Level) Governments, including Shanghai and Zhejiang, accordingly proposed new practical residents' registration policies to change the previous dualistic household policy.

The trend of the reform suggested that the urban-rural rampart, caused by the household registration policy, has been gradually disappearing at the central policy level in recent years. However, the central government’s power was limited regarding the reform implementation because the interests closely entangled with the policy, despite the reform urged nearly thirty provincial (level) governments, including some mega-cities, to implement the new policy. Sichuan, Shanxi, and Guizhou among others provinces lowered the standards for the rural population to transfer to urban household registration system in medium and small cities in their region. While many of them merely changed the urban and rural household registration to the residents household registration, take Shanghai and Anhui Province as an example. It indicated that more time was needed for the local authorities to adjust their policy strategy. However, the names of the household registration were not important, and it was the benefits shifted with the names that make the importance. For instance, how to deal with the land rights of the rural population and how to integrate their social welfare into the existing urban social welfare systems are the critical issues. While on the contrary, which is equally crucial, whether the policy as well approves the previously defined urban population to practice equally in the rural areas as the former defined rural population? These issues are so complicated and differed in areas, which made the central government theoretically and practically impossible to detail the reform-related regulations and entirely rule against the proposals from the lower level authorities. It also indicated that some administrative power was decentralized a long time ago. While at the same time it is not an easy task for the local government to form a new interest-balance and approach close to a new form of social justice.

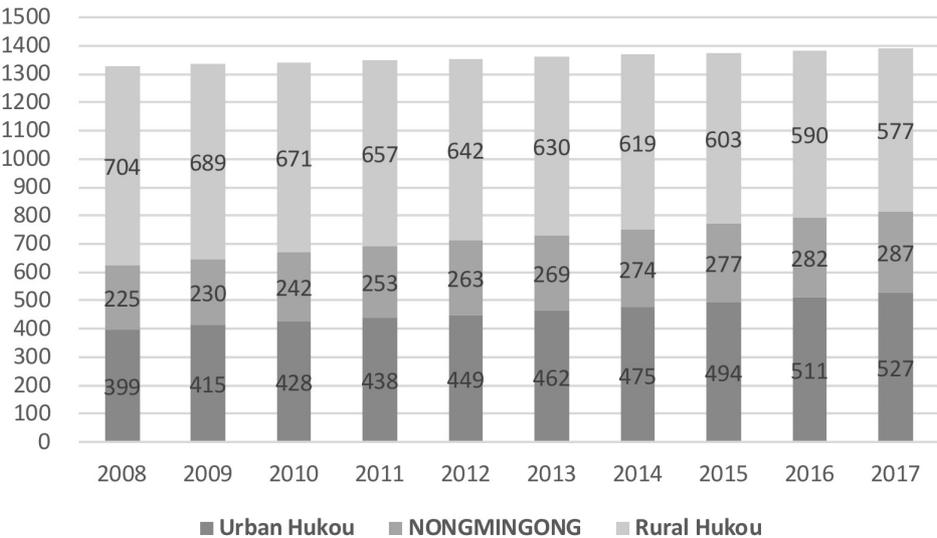


Figure 17 The shifts in the number of urban hukou, NONGMINGGONG, and rural hukou between 2008-2017

Source: The National Bureau of Statistics

Meanwhile, the reform of the household registration system failed to achieve a significant decrease in the number of NONGMINGGONG, and the rural population showed comparatively weak willingness to change their household registrations, which was in contrast to what was highly expected by the authorities and many scholars who sharply criticized the household registration policy. On the contrary, the number continued to increase from 242 million in 2010 to 287 million in 2017 according to the statistics [Figure 17]. Its proportion of the total population increased from around 17% to more than 20%, accounting for about 40% of the urban resident population. Also, the official statistics of Sichuan Province, which is one of the several major provinces that “exported” rural migrant workers, showed that only 14.8% of migrant works were willing to give up their rural household registration (Statistics Bureau of Sichuan Province 2015). Thus, with the continuing expansion of urban residents and shrinkage of the rural residents, a large amount of the “part-time rural population” and the “urban-rural amphibious population” is becoming the new norm of urban-rural development in China (Z. Shi 2013; Q. Li 2013).

Nevertheless, the intention here is not to critically discuss the outcomes of a rural-related policy, but to illustrate the facts: first, the household registration policy may not be the stumbling stone of the rural development at present, it is the benefits entrenched with it make the importance; second, it is tough for the central government to decide how to implement the reform of the household registration policy for the complex interests and the related regulations were empowered at lower level authorities. With or without an intention to decentralize the power, it happened. Besides, it could be observed that the rural population are not that keen to change their household registration as expected, especially the rural population in the more developed regions, take the PRD and the YRD for example, are less likely to drop their rural identities for their expectation on collective land value are much higher (Hao and Tang 2015; C. Chen and Fan 2016).

### **3.4 The “Socialist New Villages” and the “Beautiful Villages Construction”**

The “Document No. 1” of CPC State Council, which is the first document issues every year and indicates primary focuses of the central government, has kept concerning issues of rural development and construction since 2004. Major strategies, including increasing farmers’ incomes, new villages construction, modern agriculture development, and the urban-rural integration among others, have been proposed, and accordingly, substantial money has invested to the “Three Rural Issues” from the central finance (H. Yang 2008; B. Zhao 2017).

Against this background, the “Socialist New Villages” was officially launched at the beginning of 2006 as a top-down approach to enhance the rural construction and development (C. He and Li 2006). It was the first official policy that directly intervened towards rural spatial transformation in large scales. However, many scholars in different disciplines severely questioned the program. They argued that the SNV could not even touch the essence of the problematic issues of rural development and the core of the “Three Rural Issues,” if not increasingly problematized rural urbanization (Hu 2006; X. Shi 2008). These criticisms were soon reflected in the real practices in many regions, take the planned demolition of old villages, new villages (apartments) constructions, and ubiquitous rural prettification projects for instances.

These poor outcomes led to a reflection from the central government and the promulgation of the subsequent policy known as the “Beautiful Villages Construction.” The “Document No. 1” issued in 2016 emphasized the importance of speeding up the rural infrastructure construction, improving the level of rural public services, encouraging rural environment improvement, and the “beautiful and livable villages construction” (State Council 2016). A new round of rural transformation and revitalization practices have been promoted all over the country in the name of “Beautiful Villages Construction” since then. The BVC policy seemed to be a successive program after the SNV. It also encourages the direct intervention in rural spatial transformation but tries to avoid the negative intervention approaches applied before. However, the BVC was derived from the local authority’s initiative. The BVC practice was first officially mentioned in Anji Prefecture, Zhejiang Province, addressed as a plan of “Beautiful Villages in China” according to the archive in 2008 (Anji Prefecture Committee of CPC and Anji Prefecture People’s Government 2008). Followed was the *Action Plan of Beautiful Villages Construction* issued by the local authority. The intention was to build Anji Prefecture as the most beautiful rural area in China in the following ten years.

It was not until the 22nd of July 2013 that “beautiful villages” became prevalence, depicting the goal of contemporary rural transformations. Approximately four months after President Xi officially took office, he used exactly the same phrase - “beautiful villages”- to describe the goals of contemporary rural urbanization during one of his inspections of a pilot project regarding urban-rural integration development in Tongshan Village, Zhanggang Town, E’zhou City, Hubei Province. He stated that to achieve the urban-rural integration development and to construct beautiful villages should focus on the happiness of people, and investment should not spend on unnecessary projects of whitening the facades of rural houses, demolition houses, and constructing in large-scales, especially in historical villages (*Economic Information Daily* 2013).

The goal of the rural transformation was soon picked from his words in the field as “beautiful villages construction.” The construction of beautiful villages was then started in many regions.



Figure 18 The cover of “Guidelines for the construction of beautiful villages” (GB/T 32000-2015)  
Source: Author’s photograph (2016)

The “Guidelines for the Construction of Beautiful Villages” [Figure 18] (Central Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine of the People’s Republic of China and Standardization Administration of the People’s Republic of China 2015) was issued by the CPC State Council after seven years that the phrase “beautiful villages construction” was first used. Also, a substantial amount of grass-roots experiences and local implementation standards were taken as references for the guidelines. It was the first normative document that officially proposed the goals and criteria for the BVC. So, how did the local authorities practice the BVC program without outlines at hand, and even without specific criteria and frameworks?

Take the pilot region, which is also listed as one of the case study regions, as an example. Anji Prefecture in Zhejiang Province that is the first one that clearly included the BVC in its official document. It practiced the BVC almost five years earlier than the rest rural regions of China when they were still influenced by the SNV. The original plans were to construct villages with beautiful landscapes, increase work opportunities for local families, and emphasize harmonious

society and happy lives. The local authority even organized a professional consultant team, which was led by a member of the China Engineering Academy. The first step of beautiful villages construction in Anji was the construction of a strict comparison framework included the specific regional focuses. The villages in the area were selected and categorized into three types, which were boutique villages, important villages, and characteristic villages, according to the assessment-scores from high to low. Then the specialized funding was distributed from the annual budget of the prefecture finance. According to the plan, the strategy of beautiful villages construction covered forty villages in the area in 2008 and the strategy would cover all the other 187 villages in the following ten years (Anji Prefecture People's Government 2008).

While it was until 2010 that an official document named the *Action Plan of Beautiful Villages Construction in Zhejiang Province [2010] No. 141* proposed a 2011-2015 Plan (General Office of Zhejiang Provincial Committee 2010). It suggested a very general understanding of the concept of beautiful villages construction and set a goal for the plan in the next five years at the provincial level. The aim was to promote the rural transformation regarding suitable living, working, and traveling space. The specific goals were: 70% counties (including cities, districts) should achieve the requirements of the BVC and more than 60% of the townships (as a whole) shall implement the BVC by 2015. The BVC requirements also integrated other relevant goals, which were speeding up the eco-economic development, improving eco-environment, intensively use of resources, and promoting prosperous of rural culture. The policy was then delivered to the lower level authorities with few specific approaches to achieve these abstract goals. Take Taizhou Municipality in Zhejiang Province as an example. The General Office of Taizhou Municipality Committee issued the *Beautiful Villages Construction and Implementation Views of Taizhou Municipality [2012] No.1* (Taizhou Metropolitan Committee 2012) at the commence of 2012 in order to respond to the development assignment from top-down. This document was much more practical for it specified the concrete goals [Table 5] and the tasks were assigned to the responsible functional departments. Of course it still far from a practical route map to realize the BVC, so the assignments were further defined by different district authorities. For instance, the *Beautiful Villages Construction and Implementation Views* issued by the General Office of Huangyan District, which belongs to Taizhou Municipality, further specified the assignment. Practical projects, including what kind of rural industries to be upgraded and which kind of landscapes need to be improved among other specific tasks were proposed. While to push the projects into the final implementations, related villages were responsible for searching different approaches to realize them in the local context.

*Table 5 The construction plan for the beautiful villages of Taizhou Municipality*

Prefectures and Cities	Boutique Village in BVC					Advanced Township and Districts in					
	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total	2011 (Start)	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
Jiaojiang District	3	3	3	3	12	1	1	1	1	1	4
Huangyan District	3	6	6	3	18	1	2	2	1	1	6
Luqiao District	3	3	3	3	12	1	1	1	1	1	4
Linhai District	6	6	6	3	21	2	2	2	1	1	7
Wenlin District	6	3	6	6	21	2	1	2	2	2	7
Yuhuan District	3	3	6	3	15	1	1	2	1	1	5
Tiantai District	3	6	3	6	18	1	2	1	2	2	6
Xianju District	6	6	3	3	18	2	2	1	1	1	6
Sanmen District	3	3	3	6	15	1	1	1	2	2	5
Total	36	39	39	36	150	12	13	13	12	12	50

*Source: Government website of Taizhou Municipality (Taizhou Agriculture Office 2014)*

### **3.5 Initiatives by New Actors**

The government's emphasis on rural development through an increase in public investment, and policy encouragement and flexibility directly lead to initiatives by new actors participating in rural transformation. More and more actors including those who are not necessarily working in the public sectors were thus included.

Local villagers and rural entrepreneurs may be the earliest to respond to the new trend of rural development for they are familiar with the local contexts and sensitive to the related policy and changes. Villagers were mostly involved in agritainment, providing rural accommodation and supplying agriculture products and local food, while the rural entrepreneurs mostly engage in comparatively bigger scaled projects. Their investments in rural projects were from tens of thousands of CNY up to over hundreds of millions of CNY. They mainly focused on modernized agriculture production, tourism agriculture, rural theme parks and rural hotels among others. These rural entrepreneurs usually somehow self-related to countryside that they either grew up in the (neighboring) regions or familiar with them. Also, they usually have some business and investment experiences before shifting their focuses to rural development.

In addition to the local villagers and rural entrepreneurs, the statistics showed a trend that self-employed college graduates were forming the new dynamics in rural development (Zhou 2010). Hereinto, 80% of the college graduates were from the rural areas (Xing 2014). Many of them were engaged in the activities of agriculture production and rural services.

Besides, architects, who possessed the professional skills of spatial transformation and unique insights of the environment, were inevitably becoming active in the rural development. They are trained to have visions of future spaces that could support certain kinds of lifestyles. So their projects usually started from small house reconstructions and operated in the form of tourism-related projects that provide all kinds of experiences in the countryside.

The university professors and researchers, whose works are related to architecture, urban planning, design, and sociology, etc., also took the initiatives and actively engaged in the contemporary rural transformation. While their practices became increasingly influential and reflected in different frameworks. Their projects were various in focuses, including rural tourism, traditional farming, and rural culture and community, etc. Outstanding projects have included the Huangyan Practice by Yang Guiqing (Liang Wu, Wang, and Li 2018), the DESIGN Harvests by Lou Yongqi (M. Zhang 2017), a pig barn in Lin'an by Chen Haoru, a village library near Beijing by Li Xiaodong, a rural community center and a museum in Henan Province by He Wei, a rural regeneration project near Hangzhou recently completed by Wang Shu who won the Pritzker Prize in 2012 (Qin 2016), and etc. These actors usually have original understanding towards urban-rural interaction while possessed comparatively mature skills regarding spatial intervention, which greatly contributed to the possibility of forming alternative rural development paradigms. Besides, their professional networks also helped in promoting these practices and exhibiting them in larger platforms, which increased the influences of these practices and feedback from various channels. All the features of these practices made the lessons from the university engaged practices the most possible to be scaled up to new paradigms regarding rural transformation and contribute to relevant policies. Therefore, this research specifically identified this kind of practices to be the critical study subjects.

### **3.6 Chapter Summary**

To sum up, the trend of shifted policies concerning rural development did not indicate an intentional slow-down of the domestic urbanization process, but a strategic move affected by the pressure of globalization and requirements of new development dynamics. On the one hand, horizontally development resulted in fewer job opportunities with acceptable salaries in the urban regions in the past decades. While on the other hand, the increasingly widened gap between the numbers of the urban residents and urban household registration population indicated the "low-quality" of urbanization and a substantial amount of floating population. Besides, the rural land value was re-recognized for less and less urban construction land is

available annually. Therefore, based on all these contexts, the national land policy showed a trend of gradually loosened restrictions on rural land and a strong determination to establish a unified urban-rural construction land market, though the central government's attitude to the rural construction land remained cautious. The economic policy, on the one hand, showed strong supports to rural economic development, while on the other hand indirectly led to the spatial shrinkage of rural areas. The reform of the household registration policy lowered the conversion thresholds of the urban household registration and even encouraged the registration system shifted from urban-rural household registration to the residents household registration. However, the interests entangled with the household registration system made the substantial reform a hitherto tough issue. The NSV was considered to be a total failure regarding the rural development, and the BVC was still in an exploring phase. New practices and actors within or out of the existing administrative frameworks were observed in the rural transformation. This new phenomenon partly resulted from the huge opportunities in rural development and the flexibility of the policies, if not the uncertainty. While the university engaged practices stood out among the initiatives by the new actors for their reflections on urban-rural interactions, directing theories, and incomparable influences.

Besides, the BVC policy represents an example of the policy-shaping process in China. It showed that the practices and grassroots initiatives could be scaled-up to a national policy framework, especially the pilot policies. It may not be consistent with the common sense of China, which the policies are made from the top-down. Development assignments, of course, are not disputable being distributed from the top-down. However, the local authorities', even the lowest level of authorities, initiatives in policy shaping could never be denied. The grassroots experiences directly or indirectly contribute to and are reflected in the provincial and national policies' frameworks through all kinds of field meetings and professional discussions at different levels of the administration. Besides, the unpredicted factors existed in the administrative hierarchy [Figure 19], which are resulted from the mismatch between administrative divisions and administrative levels, also affect the policy delivered from the top-down. Two significant factors - the SOEs and villages - could be identified that created different administrative interfaces. All in all, some policies in China are formed through a mutual procedure rather than one way straight. The grass-roots practices specify the goals and realize approaches of the central assignments, while the central government could establish more specific standards based on their feedback. This reflects the apparent trend of decentralization empowerment in the process of shaping national policies.

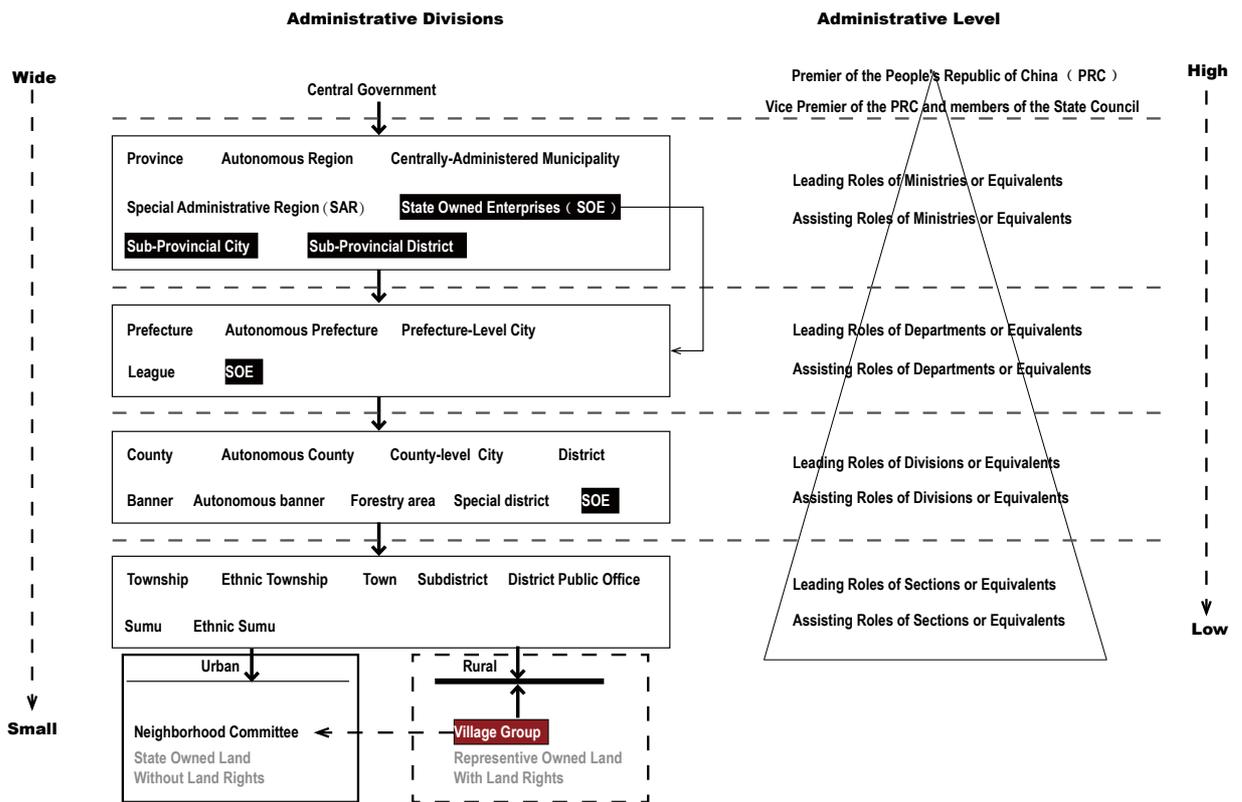


Figure 19 Framework comparison between the administrative divisions and administrative levels of China

Source: Author's construction

**Part 2 Case Study: Research Design, and Empirical Study in the  
Yangtze River Delta**

## **Chapter 4: Research Methodology and Case Selection**

The critical recognition of urbanization processes, the re-conceptualization of urban-rural relationships, the encouragement of rural transformation, and more importantly, the introduction of new diversified initiatives provided the theoretical support and the practical impetus for rural China to promote rural revitalization and to reconstruct urban-rural interrelationships. The substantial evidence directly reflecting these processes and shifts is the focus of this research.

The research mostly followed an inductive logic, which helped to recognize the actions of subjects from the perspective of the actors involved in the research area (Héritier 2008) rather than generally analyzing and synthesizing from a macro level. Accordingly, the case study approach which requires in-depth empirical investigation was applied as the primary research strategy, (Vennesson 2008). The field investigation took the form of process tracing which “allows the researcher to look for the ways in which this link manifests itself and the context in which it happens” and contributes to “learn and to evaluate empirically the preferences and perceptions of actors, their purposes, their goals, their values and their specification of the situations that face them” (Vennesson 2008). Investigation methods deriving from ethnographic research, which is intrinsically suitable for understanding complex and subtle social life events were also employed. Hence this research explicitly shades into the naturalistic approach where data-gathering and analyzing rely on participant observation and open-ended interviewing and also a writing form that essentially encompasses the qualitative research philosophy (Bray 2008). This allowed for a detailed understanding of an unfamiliar context of rural China so that local perspectives could be studied or gained.

### **4.1 Research Design**

#### **4.1.1 The Research Framework**

This research is a qualitative study based on the shifting contextualization of spatial relationships and interflows. It discusses the details of each case through archive studies, document analysis and field investigation [Figure 20]. The document and archive study focused on the general/background information of the selected cases while the in-depth fieldwork focused on the concrete and empirical evidence and knowledge from participant experiences. The fieldwork mainly involved a combination of participant observation, semi-structured

interviews, and mapping. In the process of analyzing, structuring and interpreting the information, theory tools were applied as scientific lenses.

The research started by forming and conceptualizing a topic. Then with sharpened questions, the research was designed accordingly. Cases that were fitting to the topic and reflected the main questions were listed as candidates for a pilot study. Based on the feedback from the pilot study the research strategy and selected cases were adjusted. In-depth fieldwork then proceeded, wherein the cases were documented, depicted, interpreted, and compared. All these led to the drawing of conclusions that contributed to the topic theoretically and practically.

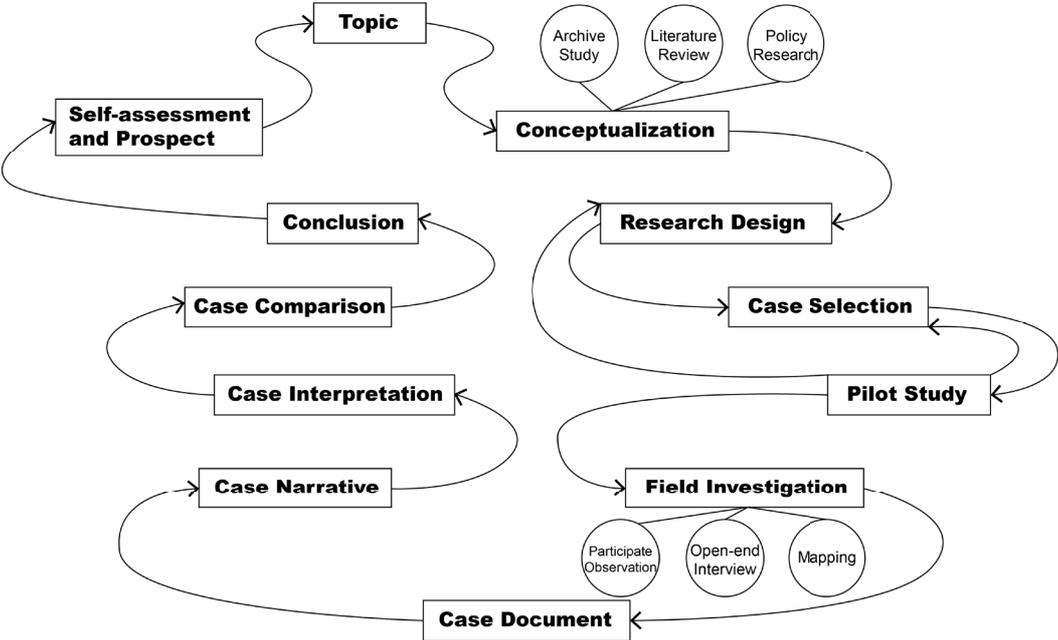


Figure 20 The research framework  
 Source: Author’s construction

**4.1.2 Research Constants**

Research boundaries are very significant in the discussion and comparative analysis of cases. Thus, the study constants for this research were identified at the beginning to delineate the research boundaries and to eliminate unnecessary interferences regarding the key questions, the literature, and the research design.

■ The Time Window

The study focused on the time between 2008 and the beginning of 2018 [Figure 21]. This time window roughly started before the global economic crisis which whacked the Chinese

urbanization paradigm. It is also consistent with the time when the development focus of the central government and research focus of scholars of different disciplines started to shift from urban areas to rural areas. The selection of this research period was also informed by some important policy events. Firstly, the direct spatial intervention policy towards rural China namely, the SNV was officially promoted in 2005. It stirred up broad discussions and strong criticisms around 2008, if not before. Secondly, the pressure of the shifts in the previous urbanization development paradigm did come a little earlier than the global economic crisis commenced (at the end of 2008), depending on different regions of the country. This period was referred to as the “post-rural urbanization” era in China (Huang et al. 2017) when the new paradigm of urbanization was still at an exploratory stage.

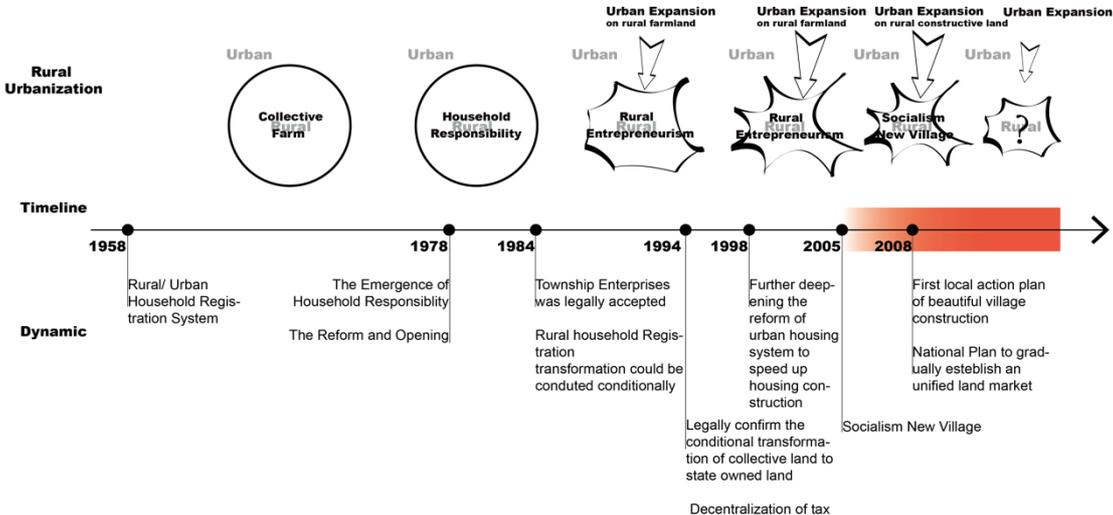


Figure 21 The research time window  
 Source: Author’s construction

■ Regional Urbanization Pressure

Urbanization pressure can create a distinct kind of rural region in a vast and diversified territory, which makes it a significant factor to be defined in advance. It helps in the definition of “ordinary villages” which are the focus of this study. Ordinary villages, as used in this research refer to those villages under a certain degree of urbanization pressure but which continue to remain rural in nature (e.g., in terms of spatial structure and social organization) in the foreseeable future. They suffered from neither huge urbanization pressures which led to the development of urban villages or new urban zones, nor were they disconnected from contemporary urbanization processes. In other words, this research focused on rural areas that remained and will continue to remain characterized by a stable agricultural identity and a rural spatial structure and land

ownership for some time. This region is geographically not situated either on urban fringes or on remote areas that are not connected to the rest of the areas.

#### ■ Policy Context

This study primarily draws on a host of national land laws, regional land regulations, regional household registration policy, and economic development policies as the policy context for the research. This is because these policies have a direct influence on rural regions. For instance, if local governments lower the threshold of urban household registration, it could possibly end up with encouraging more rural labor force to move into urban areas. Thus, the regional urbanization rate as measured by the demographic ratio would be increased. However, this change of the threshold would be less effective if the rural land value is rising. If the land policy empowers the rural population with the right to sell collective land, it will lead to an increase in both private and public investments. These investments would encourage rural development and slow down out-migration from rural regions. This suggests that whilst rural related policies on the one hand can provide new opportunities and dynamics in regards to rural urbanization in different regions, on the other hand, they can bring in unpredictable and hardly irreversible risks. Therefore, the policy context is crucial in discussions over rural transformation issues. As a result, in this study, the policy context is set as a research constant to delimit the undetermined, fluctuant and unexpected effects of the study regions from various policies.

#### **4.1.3 Independent Variables**

##### ■ Actor

Actors, who are closely related to discussions on rural sustainable dynamics, were valued the most in this study. Different actors are involved in the rural transformation process at various stages and play different roles. For instance, local authorities may be involved in different phases of different projects and enjoy different impacts. These differences are worthy of discussion. Moreover, actors could closely relate to each other and their interests intricately entangled. They can also affect the rural urbanization process independently with their own expectations and perspectives. Therefore, it was crucial to carefully trace the relations among different actors during the field investigation. Key questions included: How did actors shift, what kinds of relationships (and their limits) link them together and/or restrained them, and how did interactions differ after the transformation of the villages?

#### ■ Funding

Sources of funding were selected as another crucial independent variable in this research. Public, social, and private investments flooded rural regions creating new opportunities. However, the different investments pursued different objectives. For instances, public investments always follow political decisions and respond to political development agendas. They are allocated through a top-down process and listed as annual budgets. On the contrary, social capital may prefer to invest in projects producing substantial social impacts whilst private investments may continuously search for projects which maximize profits according to market logics. These differences in investment objectives affected rural development directly, particularly in terms of the intervention approaches and the types of projects introduced. This means that funding has a significant influence on rural transformation making it a key variable in this research.

#### ■ Initial Purpose

The initial purposes of different projects are significant since they directly affect the outcomes of rural transformation practices. Due to different purposes, various resources could be assembled, used, and re-structured through different approaches. Meanwhile, since “regional urbanization pressure” was defined as a constant in this research to specifically limit the research subjects to “ordinary villages”, the initial purposes would not be affected by distinct features of the subjects. Therefore, in this study, the initial purposes independently affected the outcomes of the practices in various aspects.

#### **4.1.4 Dependent Variables**

In the light of the main research questions, three important dependent variables were identified and discussed in this research. These comprised of sustainable development approaches, community constructions, and shifts of actor-networks.

#### ■ Sustainable Development Approaches

The sustainability of rural intervention approaches as applied in selected cases are worth studying. This is because, it is essential to question and unveil whether the revitalization phenomena caused by constantly introducing new actors into original networks of rural regions is leading to a sustainable outcome or whether it is just a momentary fever. This dependent variable thus aimed at analyzing whether the newly and gradually formed rural development dynamics in the case study areas resulted in a sustainable impetus, where external and intensive investments of capitals, human resources, and social exposures among others are no longer required, and whether the development dynamics lead to a promising future or not. This

dependent variable could further contribute to answering the question of whether these exploratory practices can scale up to new paradigms.

#### ■ Community Constructions

In addition to issues regarding the sustainability of rural intervention approaches, this research also emphasized rural community constructions in terms of resilience as a vital element for discussing and understanding current rural transformations. This research variable was mainly concerned with whether the newly introduced or formed development dynamics helped the local communities to withstand or cope with unpredicted future challenges. This is important, since it helps to flag up the outcomes of the exploratory practices. Indigenous rural acquaintance communities showed obvious vulnerability in the rapid domestic urbanization process and horizontally global development. For a considerable long time in the past, it was hard to tell if rural communities and their functions persisted throughout the process of rapid rural urbanization or they were merely transformed into residential areas for rural senior-, women-and children-dwellers. It is against these backdrops that the community constructions were considered highly relevant by this research.

#### ■ Shifts of Actor-networks

This variable is important regarding the comparison between actor-networks before and after rural interventions. It reflected the changes in actors and actor flows in the networks, which made it the most complicated variable in the study. The flows of rights, finance, local labors, land use, information, technology and so forth could indicate who actually benefited or lost from these practices and how, as well as revealing if the previously identified dilemmas were lessened or remained unchanged. Though this variable is complex and there could be missing actors during the process of mapping the networks, the shifts of the actor-networks are crucial to understanding changing actor relations in rural intervention approaches.

## **4.2 Case Selection Criteria**

The case selection criteria is very relevant in this research not only because case studies are the main part of the research and provide the empirical evidence and knowledge, but more importantly, because the case selection criteria determine how well the proposed questions are explored and deciphered, and to what extent the conclusions of the research would make relevant theoretical and practical contributions. Thus, the next section discusses criteria of case selection.

The first selection criterion was related to the research design. The cases were selected such that they were relevant to the research constants proposed in the research design (see 4.1). This was aimed at effectively limiting external influences from other policy contexts, conceptual contexts, urban-rural social relationship, and economic status quo among others.

Second, although exploratory practices of rural development covered many regions across China, the research region was limited to eastern China, the YRD to be specific. Several reasons accounted for the selection of this region. Relative to southern and eastern China, past experiences have revealed that western and northern China usually take initiatives much later when confronted with new urbanization development opportunities. This is because western China is comparatively less developed and therefore lacks the capacity to attract enough resources. Likewise, northern China suffered less from cultivating land inadequacy and thus lack transformation initiatives. Southern China was however always opened to new development impetus including changing national policies and globalization influences among others. The rest of the territories repeatedly learned from the southern experiences, positive or negative. Eastern China is a typical region where experiences from southern China were learned but which later evolved into the new development paradigms. Besides, because this research was formed under the new conceptualization of post-rural urbanization, eastern and southern China stand as the most appropriate regions since they are also relatively more connected to globalization processes and opened to experimental transformations. However, southern China, represented by the PRD, is still profoundly trapped in the swamp from the previous rural industrialization, which created rural entrepreneurs. This made YRD the most appropriate study site for this research. Equally important is the fact the experiences in the YRD are relatively easy to scale up to the national level in terms of shifting development approaches. In other words, practices in this region are more promising to turn initial experiments into grand schemes.

The third selection criteria bordered on the nature of the team leaders involved in the exploratory practices. The research limited the leading actors engaged in the projects to planning or design departments of top-ranking universities in China. The planning team mainly consisted of leading professors in the planning and design field, professionals, and students who majored in relevant disciplines but have limited working experiences in planning and design implementation. These team members themselves are very much rooted in an exploratory spirit. In contrast to most of the designers and planners in planning-relevant institutions in China, university members are not easily restrained by the existing planning paradigms and repeatedly try to search for and realize the fundamental connotation of planning and design, so they

constantly challenge and question the limits of the current planning system and existing paradigms. As a result, the research was interested in team leaders who continually practice research and who are not easily trapped in conventional planning procedures and therefore adopt a critical stance towards normative planning requirements.

The fourth and last criterion was that, the selected cases should be different in some vital aspects, even though they share similarities in terms of the research constants. This will enable the research to explore entirely different initiatives, intervention approaches, and frameworks, etc., which could result in various development dynamics and impacts.

Based on the criteria proposed above, five villages geographically located in the focus region were selected for pilot study. They respectively represented different planning and design intervention approaches and had different development expectations. However, based on the pilot study, two cases stood out for their representativeness, influence, heterogeneity, and accessibility of data among other considerations. One is Xianqiao Village, and the other one is Shatan Village. Xianqiao Village is a typical case initiated from bottom-up and conducted beyond administrative planning assignments. The village was mainly selected by the initial actors- the designers in this case- and supported by comparatively random and unstructured funding. Shatan Village was first selected by the local authorities as a candidate for the local BVC program, and its selection process was within a top-down framework. These practices actively took development opportunities to the rural areas and led to various transformations at different scales. Equally important is the fact that, one of them enjoys an international reputation, whilst the other has an overwhelming impact on the regional and national rural revitalization working frameworks. Both practices are therefore perceived as new paradigms of alternative spatial intervention approaches instead of normative intervention methods that are widely applied in China.

### **4.3 Methods of Data Collection**

This study mostly followed an inductive study process, which made the empirical materials the most significant part of this research. Both qualitative and quantitative data helped to achieve the research objectives[Table 6]. Anthropological study methods were employed in the case studies to obtain not only a general idea, but also the critical details on significant and shifting events, big or small. Most importantly the anthropological approach allowed for local/internal perspectives of the selected cases to be explored. In order to obtain different empirical evidence,

the fieldwork was categorized into three types according to the different length of stay in the villages, including longtime-stays, event-visits, and random-visits. The longtime-stays here indicates living in the selected villages for over ten days; an event-visit refers to a visit to the field when an influential or critical event was to be held; while a random-visit means to conduct the fieldwork in the chosen sites randomly.

### **Qualitative Data**

Qualitative data was mainly obtained through participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, group discussions and document analysis.

The author took different roles in the participatory observation conducted in the selected villages, including a team member of the professional group, a tourist, and a visitor. The information collected through participatory observation covered varied issues. Anything considered relevant to understanding the villages was recorded, and those relevant to the current rural transformations were explicitly marked. For instances, the study took special interests in the projects' impacts on the residents' daily routines in both villages. For instance, how and why did the local residents and tourists go to the new rural spaces introduced by the professional teams? Organized or individually? What are the new social phenomena and activities derived from the new interventions? Also, what are the attitudes of different people towards the transformations?

The semi-structured interviews were designed for different categories of respondents, including local authorities, leading professionals, local residents, tourists, students, project employees, and media reporters. The interviews with the local authorities and leading professionals were mainly conducted during the longtime-stays and the event-visits, while the interviews with the rest of the human actors were conducted randomly in the fields. The interviews conducted with the local authorities mainly focused on their understanding of current rural development policies; the recognition of local development dilemmas and challenges and future visions of the villages; their responses to new spatial interventions; and relevant projects budgets among others. The interviews designed for the leading professionals focused on various aspects: firstly, their understanding of the rural urbanization in the context of shifting policies and the re-shaping of urban-rural relationships; secondly, the primary objectives of the practices and the major obstacles they faced in the implementation and operation of the projects; thirdly, their assessments of the exploratory practices and reflections of the practices; and fourthly, their attitudes towards rural development priorities after the practices. Meanwhile, the questions for

the local residents and tourists were unstructured and opened in nature. The author only led and encouraged the interviewees to express their attitudes towards the current changes caused by the exploratory interventions in the villages, their expectations of the transformations, required improvements in terms of rural communities, their involvement in the practices, and their willingness to be involved in the transformation projects among others.

The group discussions were mainly conducted among the local residents and local authorities. The discussions mainly concerned the local development requirements, development challenges, local involvement mechanisms, and practical options and visions of future development, among others.

Besides, the reports of the media in terms of news items on the exploratory practices in the study villages provided additional perspectives to the research. They showed the different agendas of the engaged actors whilst also highlighting their similarities. The contents of media reports contained information on kinds of rural images that were shaped and advertised by the local press and higher level authorities, and how the professional teams articulated their practices to the public, among others.

Other relevant qualitative data was gathered from chorography, the local master plans, regional plans, and other archives related to the villages.

### **Quantitative Data**

The quantitative information concerning geographic, demographic, and social economic data among others was mainly obtained from documents of the local master plans, the village investigation forms (conducted by the local government), higher-level regional master plans, regional development plans, and environmental plans. Quantitative data regarding specific practices, including project scales, affected numbers of residents, costs of projects, rents, projects operational conditions, and services costs among others, were collected through field mapping and interviews with project managers, relevant staff, and villagers.

Table 6 The research methods applied and expected outcomes

<b>Methods</b>	<b>Application</b>	<b>Expected Outcomes</b>
<b>Participatory Observation</b>	<p>Location: the old main street, streets of the new village, a square in front of Taiwei Temple and other new spots in Shatan Village; the main street, rural hotels, the farm, and greenhouses belong to the DH in Xianqiao.</p> <p>Time: Between July 2015 and March 2018, over ten times of visits to each village. One pilot fieldwork is included.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To provide an internal perspective rather than a “bird’s eye view.”</li> <li>2. To reflect different actors’ attitudes towards the changes.</li> <li>3. To provide concrete evidence and knowledge of the rural transformations.</li> <li>4. To identify the interactions among different actors.</li> </ol>
<b>Group Discussions</b>	<p>Villagers in everyday life, tourists in various events, main actors in projects discussions</p> <p>Four times in Xianqiao Village Eight times in Shatan Village</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To obtain the villagers’ and tourists’ recognitions and understanding of the ongoing exploratory practices.</li> <li>2. To understand the attitudes and preferences towards the practices among different actors.</li> </ol>
<b>Semi-Structured Interviews</b>	<p>Project managers, authorities, professionals, villagers, tourists, students, reporters</p> <p>Twenty-six times in Xianqiao Village Thirty-six times in Shatan Village</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To understand the original perspectives, visions, objectives, and agendas of the practices regarding different actors.</li> <li>2. To perceive the implementation approaches, operation mechanisms, and funding sources.</li> <li>3. To understand the different actors’ attitudes toward the practices.</li> <li>4. To identify if there were other priorities that different actors had in mind.</li> </ol>
<b>Vignettes</b>	<p>Case study regions, villages, all the observed information and details regarding the university engagements and the rural transformations</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To collect substantial and detailed empirical knowledge and evidence.</li> <li>2. To explore the local and internal perspectives of the selected cases.</li> <li>3. To deliver direct impressions of the studied regions with minimum subjective inputs to form the ground for discussions and analysis.</li> </ol>
<b>Mapping</b>	<p>Case study regions, villages, all the observed spatial information, all the relevant actors regarding the rural transformations</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To visualize the internal and external connectivity.</li> <li>2. To visualize socio-spatial changes.</li> <li>3. To identify the spatial intervention spots and their scales.</li> <li>4. To visualize the actor-networks.</li> </ol>
<b>Archive Study</b>	<p>Government documents, planning</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To provide regional overviews and</li> </ol>

	documents, local chorography and investigations, informal records	background. 2. To obtain urbanization information regarding socio-economic evolutions.
<b>Media Reports</b>	Independent news reports in the newspaper, TV channels, social media platforms, and the internet	1. To obtain the knowledge before the research, including practices conceptualization and the implementation process among others. 2. To get the information and ideal images that were delivered to the audiences/public who have little clue about the exploratory practices. 3. To get to know the ideal images of the rural transformation regarding governments' and professionals' perspectives.

*Source: Author's construction*

#### **4.4 Structure of Analysis and Interpretation**

The situational analysis is structured in four parts. The first part provides a general context of each case, including the background, the origin of the project, the different stages it went through, and its current conditions. The second part details the practices in conceptual formation, spatial intervention approaches, actors' involvement, balancing negotiations, implementation processes, operational mechanisms, and the attitudes of different actors towards the practices. Vignettes are employed in this part to depict concrete experiences, evidence, and knowledge from the fields. The vignettes were recorded, selected, and then organized into different groups. Each group was targeted at responding to the different aspects of the core research questions that were proposed in the thesis. A critical discussion followed each group of vignettes, which generated the preliminary conclusions of the case study. The third part discussed the selected cases through the lenses of the theories concerning sustainable development dynamics. The fourth part, which constitutes the core of this thesis, presents a comparison of the key findings from each of the cases. The, changes, remains, intervention approaches, sustainability in terms of development dynamics, shifts of the actor-networks, and impacts among other critical issues were comparatively scrutinized in this part.

## Chapter 5: Case Study of Xianqiao Village: the “DESIGN Harvests”

### 5.1 Regional Overview and Background of Xianqiao

Xianqiao Village is located on the northern part of Chongming Island, the third largest island in China. It is geographically situated to the northeast of Shanghai. Regarding administration, it falls within the Chongming District of Shanghai Municipality [Figure 22]. Shanghai is the most developed and globalized city in the YRD, which consists of four provincial-level regions: Shanghai, Zhejiang Province, Jiangsu Province, and Anhui Province. This city attracts all sorts of resources, especially capital and beneficial policies. Nevertheless, Chongming is an exception to the greater Shanghai metropolitan area. It is not as urbanized, resulting in the expansion of urbanization in past decades. Thus, until now, it has remained under pressure for low urbanization, though it belonged territorially to Shanghai. Part of the reasons for the low urbanization come from the inconvenience and inaccessibility of the island and regional urban-rural relationships, but it is mainly due to the explicit protection policy that resulted from a regional development strategy.

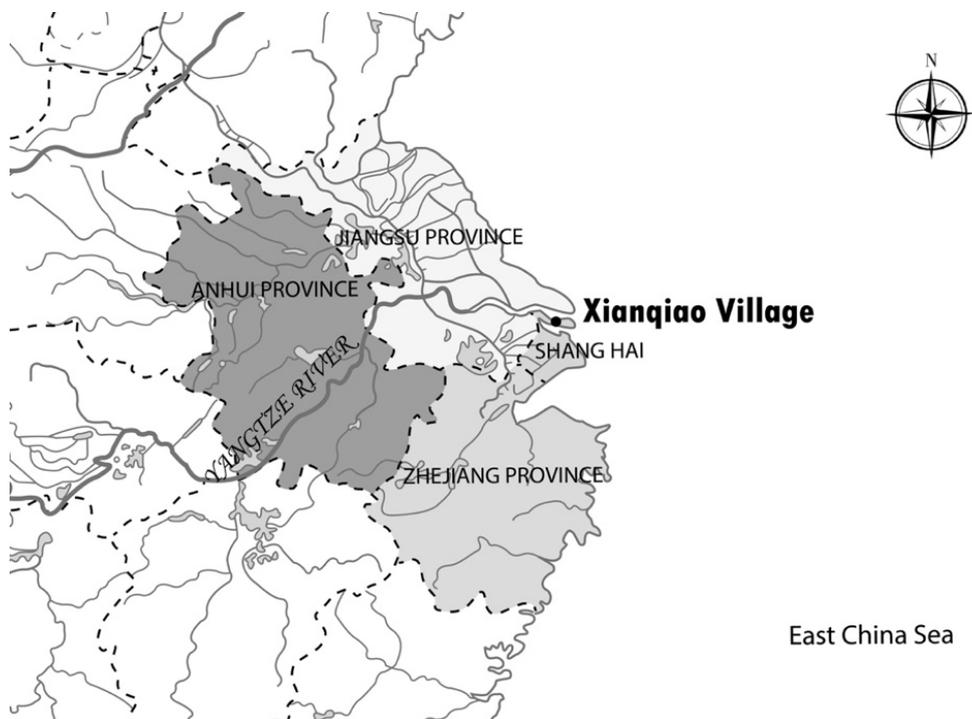


Figure 22 Geographic location of Xianqiao Village in the YRD

Source: Author's construction

As early as May 2001, the “Master Plan of Shanghai (1999-2020),” approved by the State Council, defined the Chongming region as a significant and strategically placed hinterland of Shanghai for the next century in sustainable development. The eastern part of Chongming Island, a natural bird reserve, was preserved as a significant ecologically-sensitive region. Thus, guided by the low-urbanization rate development strategy, agriculture had remained the primary economy for the island’s residents [Figure 23, 24], though a few small-scale industries, as in rural brick factories, were around for a short time between the late 1980s and early 2000s.

The urbanization of this area was further limited to an eco-friendly development paradigm, emphasizing ecological conservation, given the “Master Plan of the Three Islands of Chongming (2005-2020)” (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2005). The blueprint was further clarified in the “Chongming Ecological Island Construction Outline (2010-2020)” (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2010) thereafter. Then, the “Shanghai Master Plan (2016-2040)” legally enhanced the future development objectives of Chongming. It stated that Chongming should remain and highlight its strength of its geographic location and natural features as an eco-sedimentary island situated at the intersection of the Yangtze River and the East China Sea. The main function of this area should be to maintain the ecological balance, which could strategically support the urbanization of the rest of Shanghai. Chongming was also legally listed as one of nine regional eco-corridors and one of ten eco-conservation areas of Shanghai (Leading Group Office of Shanghai Urban Master Planning Office, 2016).

A part of the island was planned for comparatively large-scale construction named the Chengqiao New Town. It is currently located in the southeast of Chongming and plans have been made to make it one of eleven new towns to support the suburban development of Shanghai. It was designed as a medium-sized city and as the center of its region, characterized by green food and island tourism (Land and Resources Bureau of Chongming Prefecture, 2013).

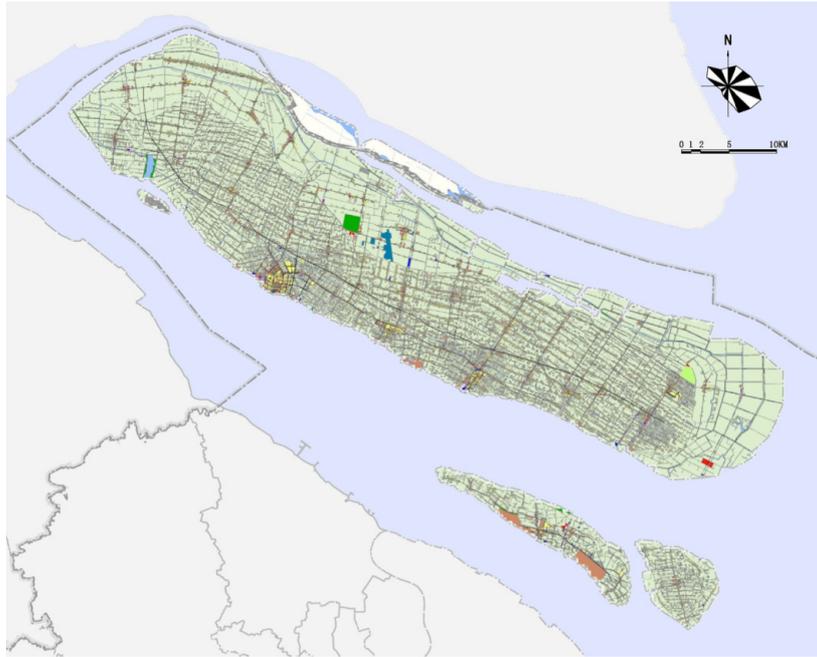


Figure 23 The land use status of Chongming Prefecture (2009)

Source: The Urban-Rural Master Plan Compilation of Chongming (Land and Resources Bureau of Chongming Prefecture 2012)

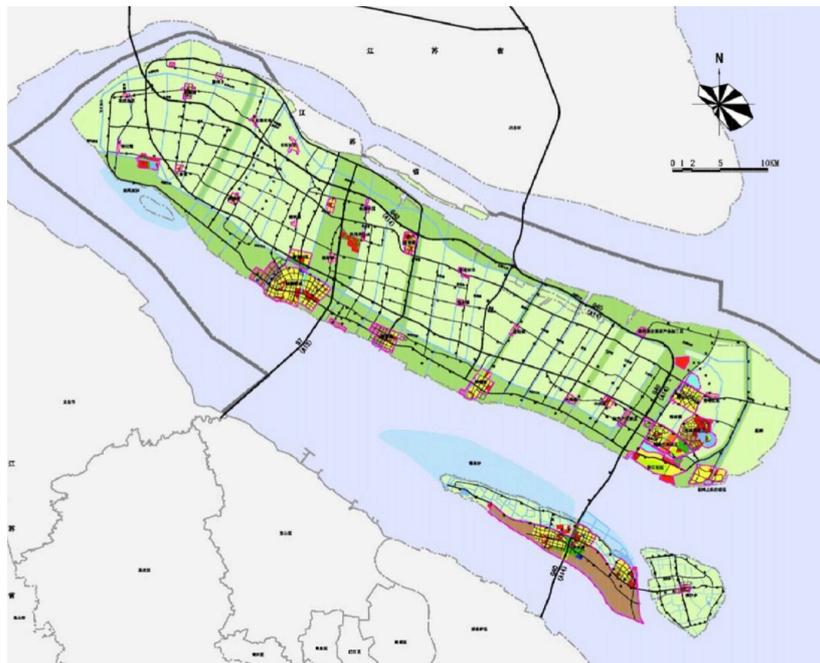


Figure 24 The integration of the spatial plan and the land use plan of Chongming Prefecture

Source: The Urban-Rural Master Plan Compilation of Chongming (Land and Resources Bureau of Chongming Prefecture 2012)

## 5.2 The Evolution of Rural Urbanization and Current Challenges

### 5.2.1 Accessibility

Transportation between Chongming and mainland Shanghai is either by water or a tunnel and bridge [Figure 25].

Before 2009, a ferryboat was the primary means of transportation between main Shanghai and Chongming, given the Yangtze River between them, and its operations depended on the weather. At present, there are three ferry terminals on the eastern coastline of mainland Shanghai, consisting of Shidongkou (mainly used for transporting automobiles), Baoyang, Wusong, and three on the western coastline of Chongming Island, consisting of Southgate, Xinhe Town and Bao Town. While Southgate, and Bao Town are frequently used, the Baoyang ferry terminal is the busiest, providing most of the high-speed ferry services, costing forty minutes time-wise and 23 CNY (approximately 3 EUR) per person. The service runs every thirty minutes. They also provide regular ferryboat services, costing only 16 to 18 CNY (about 2 EUR) per person, but taking one-and-a-half hour to cross. Southgate and Bao Town are the more popular terminals on Chongming Island as the former is close to Chengqiao New Town and the latter is the transportation hub of the island, operating eight ferryboats in thirty-six shifts per day.

It was not until 2009 that Chongming region was connected to the rest of Shanghai with the Yangtze Tunnel and Bridge (G40) [Figure 26]. Public buses started to operate the route since then and the commute takes approximately one hour. According to the “Shanghai Immediate Planning of Rail Transit (2017-2025)”, the subway will extend to Chongming. The line was planned for construction soon. It was designed to start from western Jinqiao, Minhang District and end in eastern Chenqiao Town, Chongming, estimated to be 47 kilometers in length with eight stops in-between (Shanghai Development and Reform Commission, 2016).

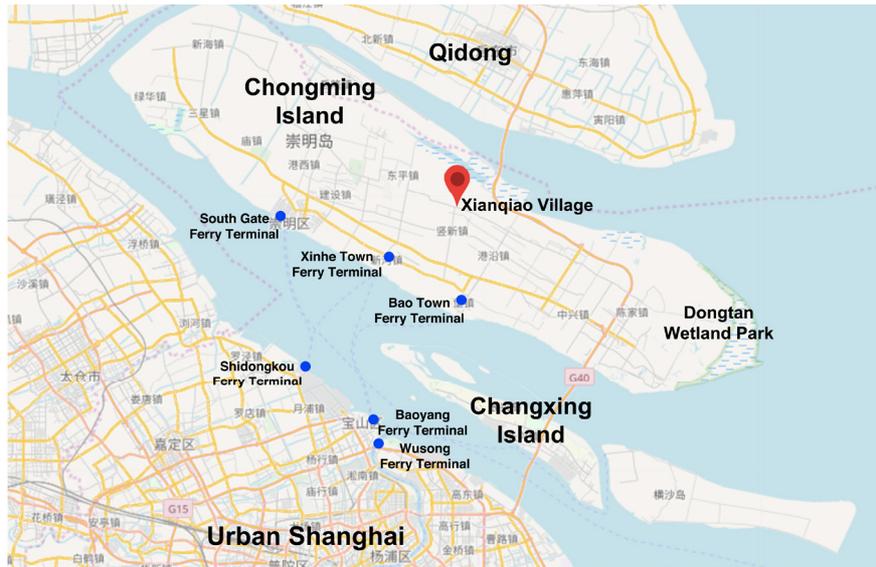


Figure 25 Regional transportation connections of Xianqiao Village

Source: Author's construction based on OpenStreetMap



Figure 26 The Yangtze Tunnel and Bridge

Source: Author's photograph (2018)

Internal traffic on the island mainly relies on roads. S128 is the main road running across the island from east to west as well as connecting to external traffic on G40. The rest of the streets are usually two-way lanes of asphalt pavement [Figure 27], branching from S128 to the island villages. Public bus service generally runs between six in the morning and seven in the evening, while waiting time differs between twenty minutes and an hour, depending on the time of day.

Xianqiao Village, as shown in the map above [Figure 25], is neither connected to any port nor directly to external traffic. It is not closely linked to any developed areas on the island as road densities in the neighborhoods are comparatively low. This road density, to some extent, reflects the level of regional development and the integration of services.



*Figure 27 Streets connecting villages, public bus service on Chongming Island  
Source: Author's photograph (2018)*

**5.2.2 Socioeconomic Development Trajectory and Spatial Evolvement**

Xianqiao Village is subject to Shuxin Town, one of the eighteen towns in the jurisdiction of Chongming District. It is a normal village without much public obligation. Xianqiao is about 140 hectares in size and approximately 1,700 to 1,800 people registered, according to an interview in 2015. Its development has not affected by newly introduced projects, as in the Dongtan Wetland on the eastern side of the island and the completed Dongping National Forest on the northern side. For a time, it was not considered extraordinary given its geographic location, lacking any resources, so regional development plans hardly reached it. As an ordinary village that did not stand out in local or regional network, it enjoyed little fame in the world outside up until 2008.



Figure 28 The spatial features of Xianqiao Village and the distribution of the DH projects  
 Source: Author's construction based on Baidu map

Due to little external influence, Xianqiao Village remains a feature of traditional Jiangnan (Southern Yangtze River) villages in terms of its spatial distribution. Most of the houses in the village are arranged along village trails and natural rivers [Figure 28], and were constructed in two- or three-storeys, covered with sloping roofs. Though the facades of the houses are mostly of typical 1990s-style with decorative tiles and a few added western elements, they still retain front yards, backyards, and Chinese-style balconies, used to support conventional rural-living habits, such as vegetable-gardening, drying agricultural products, raising fowls (mostly chickens), drying clothes and for hosting important family gathering [Figure 29]. Their living habits and daily activities are still closely related to this spatial arrangement.

Similarly, agriculture has hitherto played a significant role in the local economy and residents' livelihoods but shows increasing insufficiency [Figure 30]. Though there were brick factories in Xianqiao around the 1980s, their businesses were almost stopped around 2010 with the passing of the Chongming Ecological Island Construction Outline. This regional policy made eco-friendly development the only option for contemporary Chongming, including Xianqiao. Meanwhile, new development opportunities arose in 2008 when Xianqiao was selected by the Chongming government as one of two experimental villages, in which it received specialized public funding to upgrade and renew the conditions of its toilets and infrastructure, for instance installing solar-power streetlights. Large-scale improvements in the local environment did not make Xianqiao more attractive, yet the active involvement of the residents during the implementation process impressed local authorities. The enhanced physical environment increased the potential for its future development, which were proven later on.



*Figure 29 Rural houses in the village and villagers' everyday habits*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*



*Figure 30 Villagers were farming in the field*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

On one hand, top-down interventions did not change the fact that farming was no longer enough to support the locals' livelihoods. Thus, faced with an increasingly aging population and a labor shortage in the village, Xianqiao Village representatives initiated and accomplished a local rural land transfer according to the new rural land regulations around 2008. The adjustment spared the unused rural lands and prepared them for a market. Six rural cooperations [Figure 31], including the eco-agriculturally grown rice, vegetables, and fruits, were later established on the collectively-owned lands through long-term leasing contracts. These projects, launched by local entrepreneurs, were approved by the village representatives and related villagers at the time.

The transaction included one important condition: employment priority. In return for renting the lands, the cooperations were to offer preferential employment to local villagers. According to the village leader, agriculture production in the form of rural cooperations was a practical method to organizing comparatively large-scale agricultural activity, improving the efficiency of the land usage.



Figure 31 Various rural cooperatives in the village  
 Source: Author’s photograph (2015)

On the other hand, however, due to the residents’ cooperative attitudes during previous interventions, Xianqiao Village was recommended by the Chongming authorities to a Tongji University research team, who were looking for an ordinary village, on which to conduct an academic study in 2008. This research later evolved into a rural practice known as the “DESIGN Harvests” (DH), implemented in 2010. By 2017, four rural hotels and a farm were completed and operated by the DH.

According to an interview of the village leader in 2015, there were already eight rural agritainment facilities operated by local residents in Xianqiao around 2008, Then according to a local agritainment owner, the number increased to more than ten in 2018.

**5.2.3 Major Challenges and Restrains**

The Chongming Ecological Island Construction Outline issued in 2010 has been protecting the natural resources and environment of Xianqiao, while at the same time, local development has been largely restrained by the regional development strategy. The village transformation was stagnated for lack of outstanding landscape, natural resources and the inconvenience of access. Developing strategies of tourism were thus hard to realize. Also, the aging population had increased according to the village leader. At first, when there were only a few seniors, villagers

could help each other out, but as many of the villagers aged, the others could no longer rely on their neighbors.

At the same time, those who had lived in the village a long time and had taken farming as a major source of income could hardly support their daily expenses anymore. The annual income for agriculture production and land leasing around 15000 CNY (approximately 2,070 EUR) per hectare, far from enough to support villagers' livelihoods. Hence, most of the local labors had to work to supplement family income.

Villagers from Chongming, mainly worked as taxi drivers. Interviewing these drivers, one found that the villagers who worked in urban Shanghai expressed positive attitudes towards the development of Chongming in recent years. At the same time, they also expressed strong regret for having to work in urban Shanghai, while leaving their families and comfortable homes on the island. However, none considered dropping their rural household registration and changing to a more urban dwelling. Part of their confidence was in the value of land and the better environment of Chongming. They retained a strong sense of regional identity. Most of them expressed pride in Chongming, a cozy place to live that produced healthy food. One taxi driver even offered his phone number and said: "Let me know if you want chickens and eggs or any other Chongming agriculture products. I go back to Chongming almost every month, so I can bring some local produce to you at a fee if you want."

### **5.3 The "DESIGN Harvests" in Xianqiao**

#### **5.3.1 The Initial Opportunity and the Original Vision**

In 2008, a research project initiated by the College of Design and Innovation at Tongji University, once known as the Art and Design Department belonging to the College of Architecture and Urban Planning before 2009, selected Xianqiao Village as an experimental site to research sustainable community design under urban-rural relations. The local authorities recommended Xianqiao, when the project leader, a senior professor, explained his research plan and asked for an ordinary village on which he could conduct his research. They chose Xianqiao as it neither possessed any unique resource nor was it included in any existing eco-city plans as a featured village. The project started before the construction of the Yangtze Tunnel and Bridge, which could allowed direct overland connection between the village and urban Shanghai. At that time, travel from mainland Shanghai and water transportations were inevitable. Four hours or even more in total was needed to Xianqiao took much longer, requiring water transport. Between

buses and ferryboats, and depending on unstable weather conditions, which could stop all ferrying services at times, the trip could take even more than four hours. After direct overland connections became available, shortening the time to reach Xianqiao to about two hours, the research was implemented.

According to the professor, the DH is “a research-oriented project, which commenced with the question of how to integrate urban-rural resources and requirements through design. Its aim was searching for a new sustainable design model and development paradigms affecting urban-rural interactions and redefining various relationships, including social, environmental, economic and cultural among others” (Sina News, 2017). He explained that the research started the year Shanghai hosted the World Expo with the theme of “Better City, Better Life.” He found the slogan ambiguous as it could be misunderstood to mean only cities could support better lives. He clarified, “I always believe that a better society is a society with choices and diversity. [The] Chinese dream should be diversified. The fact-half of the Chinese population were in rural [environment]- should be taken as an opportunity rather than a problem...We should prevent homogeneous development resulted from globalization.” Believing that the value of rural China was far from properly recognized, his thought was to use design as a medium to unveil new possibilities beyond homogeneity by redefining urban-rural problems. The differences between urban and rural China in living styles and producing organizations should evolve into a huge new economy that would stimulate need. The research team led by this professor was working on “Product-Service-System Design” to respond to this need (Sina News, 2017). A senior manager, engaged in the DH project from the research phase to operation, confirmed the original idea in an interview. She said: “We have been searching for new dynamics in the rural transformation through design by emphasizing the rural context. The aim was also to provide a channel for urban dwellers to really get to know what rural areas could be like, therefore, changing their outdated impressions towards villages.” Thus, the project specifically sought an ordinary village to practice their findings, so that the experiences would be more persuasive and easier to expand to other regions.

In fact, the research was not at first planned to be implemented. It was the team members who strongly believed in their findings that promoted its implementation. In 2010, teachers and students involved and interested in the project rented about two hectares of farmland and three rural houses in Xianqiao, starting their rural dream of “DESIGN Harvests.” This project was supported by the “Peach Bloom Village Experiment (Taohua Village Experiment)” (Lin and Zhang, 2010) and cooperated with the design and consulting enterprise located in urban Shanghai. This

enterprise had been working closely with academic networks, including DESIS and CUMULUS among others. After two years of its implementation, according to the project manager, the project started to make a profit.

### **5.3.2 Spatial Intervention Approaches**

The DH took acupuncture, a concept is derived from traditional Chinese medicine, as a strategy to guide the spatial intervention in Xianqiao. Members from the DH identified small spatial spots spread around the village and transformed them one by one, rather than conducting large-scale reconstruction projects. A prototype of the projects implemented in Xianqiao was transforming a village house available for rent. The owners of the house, an elderly couple, had deep emotional connections with rural land and farming, so the project was named Tiangeng, a reference to farmland ridges in Chinese.

The project only took fourteen days from start to finish with more than thirty interdisciplinary young designers and professionals, both native and from abroad, organized by DESIS, working together to conceive the design plan. To reflect the local identity and constructive features, they identified and selected the main materials in the project, using red bricks produced by a local factory, dark tiles, and discarded wooden parts from local houses, including doors and windows among other materials. The implementation process also involved the wisdom of the property owners and local craftsmen. From identifying the subject to conceiving a design, from selecting the materials to sieving sands, from construction to decoration, each step forward was experimental with young designers playing a critical role throughout the process.

Comparing the before and after the house's transformation, its façades mostly remained the same, whereas its local characteristics were emphasized by reshaping a semi-private space encompassing a long red-brick dwarf walls and a vegetable garden in the front yard. Inner spaces were highlighted, showing a strong sense of design with respect for local and cultural features, such as the brick partition walls, wooden doors and detailed decorations. The backyard was cleaned out and changed into a cozy barbecue space beside a small river.

### **5.3.3 Completed Projects and Operation Mechanisms**

By March 2018, there were one eco-farm with six greenhouses and four rural hotels completed and operated in Xianqiao by the DH practice. The DH farm has been providing plenty of seasonal products to the market through its own networks.

## ■ Greenhouses and Eco-Toilet on the Farm

There are six greenhouses [Figure 32] established on the south end of the rented farmland, one of which was transformed into a multi-functional hall. It is used to host various events, including exhibitions, weddings, craft studios and formal dinners. The other five are used for traditional planting. Various vegetables, as well as vanilla plant, are grown in the greenhouses according to the seasons, using eco-friendly farming methods without the use of fertilizer. The rest of the rented farmland is used for cultivating the most common crop in southern China-rice. Apart from other farms, the rice planted in the DH farm is harvested once a year, though in southern China, rice is generally harvested three to four times a year. Due to this long cycle, it was not profitable at first, according to the staff working on the farm, as traditional planting methods led to less harvests compared to the chemical-aided. Even the farmers hired by the DH did not understand the reason for bothering to go back to the traditional planting method. However, the profits per hectare of farmland gradually increased close to the local average as the market accepted eco-agricultural products. Since then, the farmers became more willing to use the traditional method and realized its value. The amount and varieties of produce from the DH farm have also been increasing over time. The produce is sold through different channels, among which memberships and through social media platforms online are the main streams.



*Figure 32 Greenhouses on the DH farm*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

In addition to the changes in farming, practical eco-technics used to improve necessary infrastructures were also applied on the farm. For example, an eco-toilet [Figure 33] was located in front of the greenhouses. This toilet was in consideration of the limited space inside the greenhouse and its required function. It is a small-scale construction shaped like a pyramid. The small space was built with wooden battens, discarded doors from demolished rural houses, and plastic films used for covering the greenhouses. The utilities inside the “plastic pyramid,” similarly, continued the concept of eco-friendliness. Instead of water, chaffs that had generally

been treated as fowl food or agricultural waste were used to cover and flush away excrement. This is not an entirely new idea as Chinese used similar methods when only dry toilets were available. However, it was a spark of creativity to introduce such devices indoor, as well as improving their functions and acceptability through design.



Figure 33 The eco-friendly toilet on the DH farm

Source: Author's photograph (2016)

#### ■ Four Rural Hotels

Four ordinary, if not shabby, rural houses were identified, rented, and renovated into rural hotels by designers from or cooperated with the DH. Different concepts were used to guide these renovation projects, given different original spatial structures and surrounding environment, and market requirements.

#### **Tiangeng, Xianqiao No. 930**

The first project was Tiangeng, located on the north side of Mid-Xianqiao Rd but not close to the road itself. On foot, it takes more than fifteen minutes from the Xianqiao bus station as the house is not close to the main entrance of the village either. It was a bungalow built with red bricks, turned into a five bedroom rural hotel with a small but comfortable front yard and a barbecue in the back. The new building reflected and emphasized local and cultural features [Figure 34] since every piece of materials used in its transformation either from a nearby brick factory that only took a few minutes' drive or the wooden parts from abandoned windows, doors, furniture and local houses. The hotel can be booked online at a cost of approximately 2500 CNY (about 320 EUR) per day. The rental price fluctuates during the holiday season and weekends.



Figure 34 The transformed rural hotel – Tiangeng

Source: Author's photograph (2016)

### Hejing, Xianqiao No. 918

Hejing was another brick bungalow in Xianqiao, located on the south side of Mid-Xianqiao Rd, and like Tiangeng, was not located near the road. In fact, it may even have been a little bit hard to find as it was hidden in thick green bushes with no visible signs or tour maps to direct one's way, though maps of the village were made between 2017 and 2018 by village collectives. The renovation project of Hejing took three designers and local craftsmen. Together, they turned this empty house into a three-bedroom rural hotel in two years. As with Tiangeng, a considerable part of the materials used in the project were locally sourced, either produced or collected. There were no fancy urban elements added, while the rustic walls and front yard were maintained and emphasized [Figure 35]. This place is advertised by the DH as a perfect spot to avoid the crowded metropolitan area (DesignHarvests official website, 2017). It could also be booked online and the cost was 2100 CNY (about 270 EUR) per day.



*Figure 35 The transformed rural hotel – Hejing*

*Source: Author's photograph (2018)*

### **Huami, Xianqiao No. 660**

Compared with Tiangeng and Hejing, Huami was located closer to the main entrance to Xianqiao and situated on the north side of Mid-Xianqiao Rd, though it was still easily missed by visitors. The façade of this rural house was similar to its neighboring houses and not much was changed in its renovation. The most critical style of ceramic tiles populated in the 1990s was retained [Figure 36]. Tourists could walk by Huami several times without noticing it to be a DH project, given the front-yard door was closed. Only one small doorplate beside the front entrance carved with the DH logo gave any hint that it was. However, the front yard and interior space were distinctive with strong modern elements combined with local features [Figure 37]. This three-storey house was transformed into a ten-bedroom hotel, available for both whole and separate booking. A shared kitchen, living room and game room are on the ground floor [Figure 38]. Suites and bedrooms were arranged on the first and second floor, managed by another

entrance with an electronic lock further in. To rent the whole house it costed upward from 5000 CNY (about 642 EUR) per day, whereas a single room was between 500 and 700CNY (about 64 to 90EUR), breakfast included.



Figure 36 The transformed rural hotel – Huami (Xianqiao No.660)  
 Source: Author’s photograph (2018)



Figure 37 The front yard and an indoor entrance  
 Source: Author’s photograph (2018)



Figure 38 The inner spaces of Huami  
 Source: Author’s photograph (2018)

### **The Art Villa of Vision, Xianqiao No. 1018**

Due to the increasing and diversifying needs of rural tourism, two more houses were rented by the DH in 2016, one of which was operated on a trial basis in 2017, named “Vision”. This hotel was located far from the previously introduced DH projects. The guiding concept of its renovation was slightly shifted. While its façade of ceramic tiles was unchanged, a swimming pool and a sunroom were added to the front and western yard of this two-and-a-half storey house [Figure 39]. It was specifically designed for families with children who wanted to spend their weekend in Xianqiao. The concept of its design, on one hand, complemented the activities provided by the DH that were aimed at attracting children’s interest in agriculture, adventures in the countryside and other outdoor activities, while on the other hand, it addressed the diverse needs of the tourist market. According to the DH’s official social media account, the hotel has seven bedrooms designed with differing color schemes. The rent costs from 500 to 1000 CYN (about 65 to 129 EUR), one room per day (<http://wx.miot.cn/i-68896?innid=6889>).



*Figure 39 The transformed rural hotel – Chongjing/ Vision (No. 1018)*

*Source: Author’s photograph (2018)*

### **■ The “Flow Flux” 2016 Artist Residency Program**

In cooperation with the Shanghai International Culture Association and the College of Design and Innovation from Tongji University, the DH launched its first artist residency program in 2016. The program invited young artists to stay in Xianqiao to create artworks with the theme of “Flow Flux” [Figure 40]. The selected artists coming from various nations, as in Britain, Italy, America, China and Iceland, resided in the village for a period that varied between thirty and forty-five days (DESIGNHarvests Official Website 2016). The primary purpose of this program was to encourage interactions between the “rural” and art, thereby supporting the integration of art in rural contexts, and in return, rural elements could inspire the artists’ creations.

The program inspired over ten pieces of art that were widely spread across the facades of houses in Xianqiao [Figure 41]. The works utilized various artistic expressions combined with rural-cultural elements. A QR code could be found beside every piece. Scanning the code, one could see the concept and story behind each creation.

Now, the “Flow Flux” has evolved into a regular art program focused on broad themes, including design, culture and interactions among others. It has invited and encouraged artists of varying backgrounds to deeply engage people with works of art regarding the interactions between the rural and the urban.

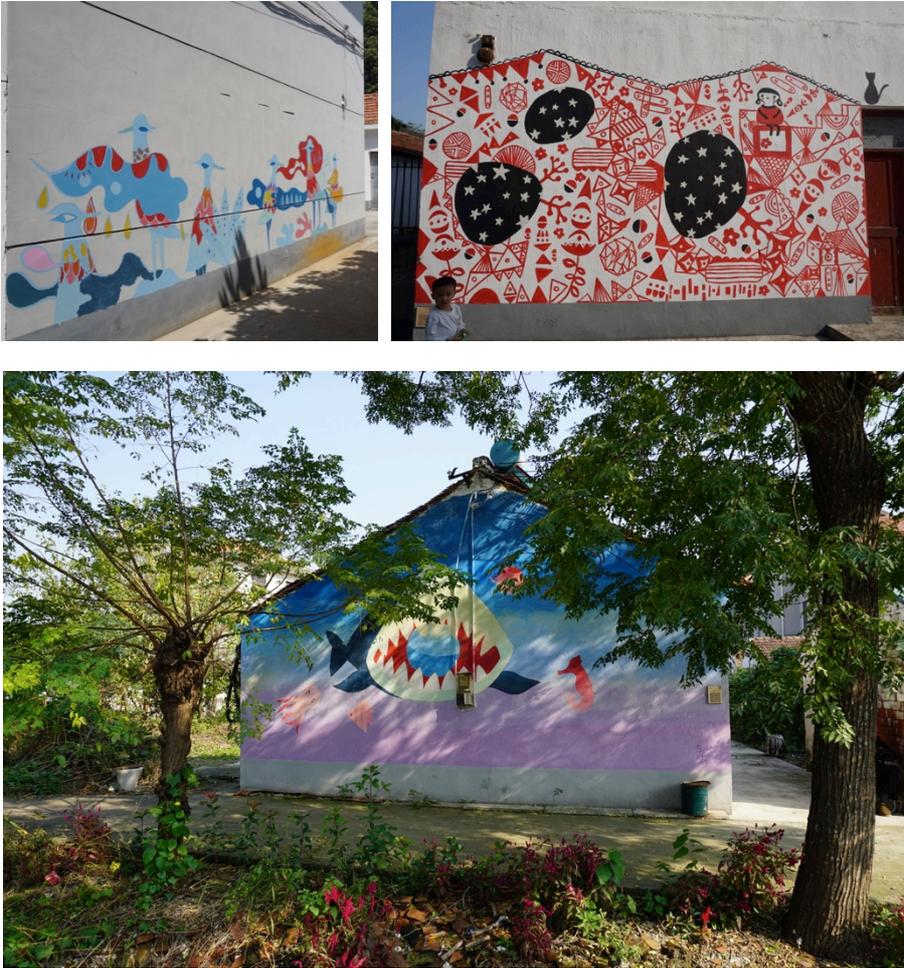


Figure 40 Artworks in Xianqiao created by young artists

Source: Author’s photograph (2016)



Figure 41 The spatial distribution of the artworks in the village  
 Source: Author's photograph from the "Country FunFair 2016" (2016)

■ **Agriculture Products and the Sales Platforms**

Various products and their sales channels constituted another essential project of the DH, which became increasingly important for rural renovation experiences and project operations. In autumn 2015, upon the first visit to DH, there was only one staff member packing the DH-produced rice in an office room located on the ground floor of a village office building. Back then, rice was mainly offered as gifts, or only sold, to DH members. The staff explained, "At present, the output of our farm is limited and merely enough for companies' orders that require high-quality presents for their staff and clients. Although you would have no problem finding the products sold online, they are insufficient in quantity and variety."

Just a year later, when invited to join a WeChat group organized by the project manager of the DH, the products offered by DH and its sales model had changed a lot. Various products [Figure 42] were promoted seasonally in the WeChat group, and using the platform's in-built transaction feature made purchases incredibly convenient. The DH's produce were no longer limited to rice, but had expanded to different kinds of rice, rice wine, sweet fermented rice (Jiuniang) and vegetables among others. Even a local specialty called a Chongming cake [Figure 43] could be found on sale. Moreover, produce were packed in a series of specifically designed packages with well-recognized logos. Their main sales network had also shifted to the WeChat group. The group had around 350 members, comprised of people familiar with the DH practice. These people either visited Xianqiao before or knew the practice well enough from colleagues and friends.

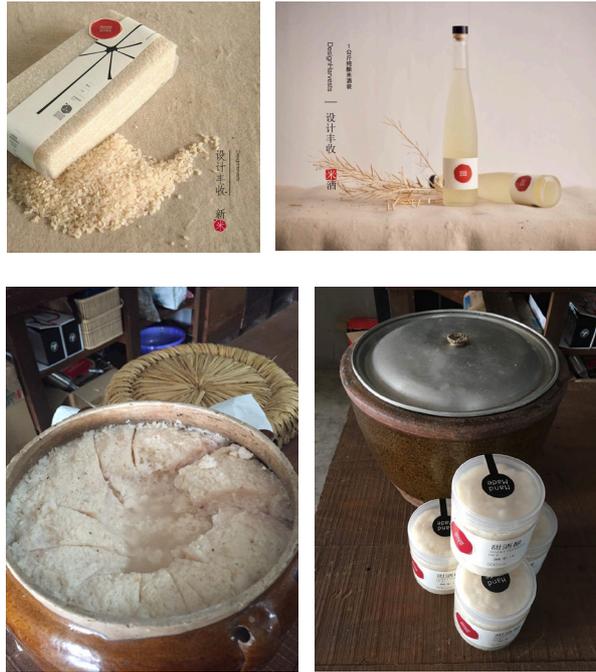


Figure 42 Main rice products from the DH – single-season rice, rice wine, and ferment rice (from top left to bottom right)

Source: Push notice from the DH official account of WeChat (2016)



Figure 43 The fresh Chongming cake and its DH packaging

Source: Push notice from the DH official social account of WeChat (2016)

More importantly, the products sold in the group were not limited to the DH but included green products from other rural cooperations in Xianqiao under the condition of providing equivalent quality. Sharing the sales network encouraged local agricultural businesses and increased opportunities for cooperation, while greatly supplementing insufficient supply in both kinds and quantities of DH products.

## 5.4 Reflection of the “DESIGN Harvests” through Vignettes

The DH completed most of the construction of its projects in Xianqiao Village long before the present field investigation. Detailed introductions and analysis were given in the previous section (5.3). This section is mainly focused upon reflecting on more in-depth interactions and shifts caused by DH from three perspectives: 1) understanding the socio-cultural context that the DH practice has contributed to and villagers’ attitudes towards the DH in depth, 2) learning the (shifts in) interactions among those involved, and 3) analyzing the emerging revitalization dynamics caused by the DH through learning the use of renovated spaces operated by the DH. To achieve these goals, vignettes here provide direct depictions of real experiences in Xianqiao.

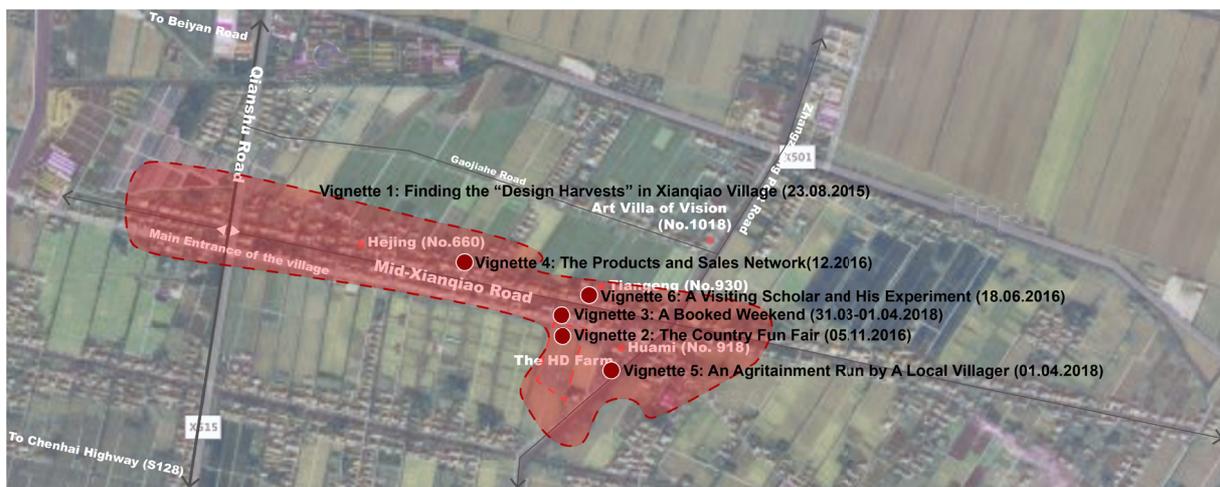


Figure 44 An overview of selected vignettes of Xianqiao Village

Source: Author's construction based on Baidu map

Over thirty vignettes resulted from daily observations in Xianqiao Village, among which, six seen to be most representative of the experience were selected and categorized into three thematic groups that particularly addressed the above-listed foci [Figure 44]. Accordingly, an analytic discussion follows every group of vignettes. The first group features a vignette depicting the effect of DH on the local environment, the villagers and their daily lives, thereby addressing the first perspective. The second, third and fourth vignettes comprise the second group, representing the projects’ operation, visitors’ attitudes and people’s (shifting) interaction. The second vignette represents a seasonal thematic event-the primary form of activities by the DH on the DH farm, the third describes the sales network established by the DH and the experience of using it, and the fourth depicts a weekend when the DH hotels and activities were booked by visitors to Xianqiao. Then, the last two vignettes comprise the third group, reflecting the tangible and intangible effects of the university-initiated projects and the different understanding of varying individuals towards the DH experiences of rural renovation. The fifth vignette depicts

the DH's effect on the local agritainment and the sixth features an independent project conducted by a teacher from another Chinese university.

#### 5.4.1 Projects Embedded in the Local Context

##### Vignette 1: Finding the “Design Harvests” in Xianqiao Village

On the 23rd of August 2015, the rain was heavy but stopped soon after. The drive from downtown Shanghai to Chongming Island was three hours, but half that time was spent trapped in the urban area, due to a traffic jam between cars heading to the G40 tunnel and bridge. However, traffic lightened once outside urban Shanghai. Once out, it took another half hour to reach Xianqiao after arriving at Chongming. If one did not check the website in advance, it was easy to miss the village entrance. The bamboo archway standing on the roadside, marking the entrance, was of a traditional style [Figure 45]. In comparison, the bus stop located ten meters from the entrance was far more noticeable. Taking the bus at this stop, one could travel from the village to the other towns on the island.



*Figure 45 The entrance of Xianqiao Village*

*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

The tarmac road connected to the village seemed to be very clean, even new, especially after the rain. However, something unusual for these ordinary village, stood alongside the road-the solar- and wind-power streetlights. Entering from the east, the street was empty and extremely quiet. Occasionally, there were one or two small rusty pickups driven by aged men that passed by and a few people walking in a rush. The houses lining either side of the street were two-and-a-half storeys and in the form of the typical 1990s styles, decorated with ceramic tiles. In front of each house was a big yard. Most of the yards had vegetable gardens and only several of them with

parked cars. The village center, village-representative office building, rural cooperatives producing agricultural products and the local temple were also located alongside the street. Farms operated by these cooperatives were gated with green iron nets and similar-looking over-sized wooden archway entrances. According to the information boards in front of the entrances, these farms were green farms producing organic products.

However, glimpsing the village, there was no sign of the DH. After turning back and forth on the almost empty street for a few times, several ordinary greenhouses located close to the east end of the main street would catch one's attention. The greenhouses were not close to the street but located fifty meters from the south, standing past the rice field. An alley about one-and-a-half meters in width ran from the greenhouses to the street. There was no gate and obvious sign except for several small brown pots showing a vague map set under a tree nearby. It was hard to confirm whether the place was operated by the DH or not without people working or touring the field.

All of a sudden, there was a middle-aged man, about fifty, walking eastward. His skin was as dark as a typical farmer's, working in the fields for a long time. Instead of using an umbrella, he wore a straw hat. More importantly though, he wore a light green short T-shirt with the distinctly yellow DH logo on the left sleeve.

Pointing to the farmland, one addressed him and asked, "Hello, is this the DH farm?"

The man turned his head and smiled with pride, pointing to a decoration under the tree as he replied, "Yes, it is. Do you have an appointment? There is no one on the farm right now and you'd better find the staffs in the office in the village-representative building. The DH's office is on the ground floor."

Upon thanking the man, one became curious if he was a local resident and why he was wearing a T-shirt with the DH logo. The man said he was a villager, not an employee of the DH, but occasionally, he helped with the farm work, especially in the busy season. Saying farewell to the man, one walked right into the un-gated farm. The greenhouses were locked, though it was not hard to determine how the greenhouses were arranged. Peeking through their plastic doors, one was multifunctional hall, while the rest was vegetable gardens.

After a brief tour of the farm and heading to the office mentioned by the villager, the DH office was comparatively easier to locate, since a young staff member was packing rice near a window close to the entrance of the village-representative building's front yard. Also, there was a sign of the DH by the door beside the window. The young man seemed surprised at an unexpected visitor showing at the door, but he politely introduced himself after hearing the intention for the visit. It turned out he was part of the DH staff in charge of the agricultural products from the farm. He said that rice was the primary product of the DH farm but customers could not directly purchase it yet as the output was not enough. "Right now, the agriculture products are limited to the company member orders as high-quality presents for staff and clients. You'd have no problem finding the products sold online but the supply might be limited."

Continuing, one asked the number of staff currently working for the DH in the village. The young man answered that two other young crews also had long-term contracts and were in charge of rural hotels, activity organizations, and farmlands. Then one asked how much could be made in the DH. Smiling shyly, the man just said it was close to what he had made before in urban Shanghai, not saying any concrete figure.

After confirming the hotels' doorplates and general directions with the staff, one started to locate each and every rural hotel run by the DH. The first one found was named Tiangeng. Again, there was no noticeable sign off the street but a small brown pot set at the corner of a house by the street displayed a map to Tiangeng. Following the map, one entered the nearby alley and was met with a long, red-brick dwarf wall and followed it. The wall ended at the front yard of Tiangeng. The door was open and a big vegetable garden occupied most of the front yard but the hotel was closed, so it was impossible to see more.

Leaving Tiangeng, one then moved to find the second rural hotel, Hejing. According to the numbers for their doorplates, Tiangeng and Hejing should have been close to one another. However, after walking back and forth in the neighboring area for over half an hour, it was a failure to locate, since the number stopped at the bridge on the east end of the street. Luckily, a kind old villager was passing by and led the way to Hejing, which was hidden by some thick bushes. Like Tiangeng, Hejing was not open but the front yard was visible through the bushes. The yard was partially covered by the house's roof and the place under it was arranged as a dining area with traditional rural tables and benches, whereas the rest extended to the adjacent vegetable farmland.

The third rural hotel, Huami, was far from Tiangeng, Hejing, and the DH farm, yet was comparatively easier to locate, since it was the only one located by the main street and its front door was wide open. However, apart from a big, clean, cement-laid front yard, it was impossible to see more as the hotel was booked for the day.

## **Discussion**

- (1) The village was not that ordinary. Though Xianqiao has no advantage in either location or resources, it maintains an above-average quality of infrastructure in both the natural and built environment.
- (2) The phenomenon of a dwindling residential population and aging locale was evident.
- (3) Agriculture remains vital in daily lives for the locals. Empty spaces in the village, regardless whether they were public or private, big or small, designed or not, were used for farming.
- (4) The DH practice affected little in the built environment. Also, DH projects conveyed the designers' attitude of respect and humility towards the local culture.
- (5) In contrast with other rural cooperatives gated by oversized doors, the DH farm in Xianqiao was open to the public, directed by a more open concept.
- (6) The local villagers were familiar with the DH practice.

### **5.4.2 Activities Provided by the “DESIGN Harvests”**

#### **Vignette 2: The Country Fun Fair**

##### **■ Activities Arranged**

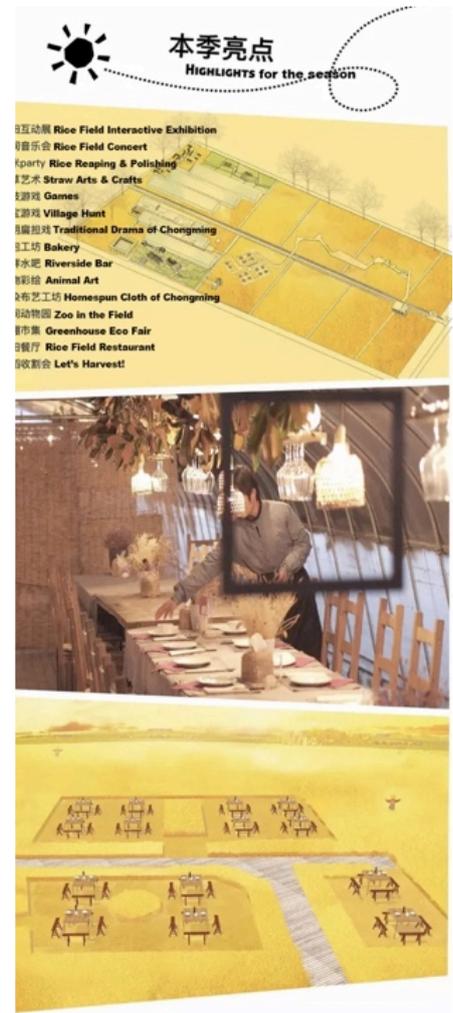
“Eating in the rice field, singing in the countryside, having fun with families and friends, shopping in an ecological greenhouse, viewing works of art in a small village and experiencing a day as a farmer. This is what Country Fun Fair offers to you. This is a ticket reaching nature. This is the door to touching the country.

Country Fun Fair comes from our wish to advance sustainable rural-urban interaction and create change starting with our action. Not only to consider a better life for cities, but also for countries. We had a successful attempt in this spring. Now we will meet you again this golden fall as we promised!”  
(Push notice from the DH, 2016)

The DH announced its new seasonal event for 2016 through the most popular social media platform in China - WeChat [Figure 46]. The notice was displayed in both Chinese and English. Many people received this notification and were attracted to the annual rural event in Xianqiao.

It started on the fifth of November 2016, at exactly the time when the single cropping rice from the DH farm was to be harvested. A symbolic wooden gate [Figure 47] without any paint or doors, but with a strong sense of design was constructed in front of the farm on the trail leading to the greenhouses. The gate was erected several days before the event, as was a wooden gallery extended along the trail to the rice field.

By one o'clock in the afternoon, dozens of cars were parked along the street in front of the DH farm. Some tourists gathered at the new front gate, waiting for check-in. Their tickets were either bought online or on the farm. On weekdays, an adult ticket cost 68 CNY (9.4 EUR), while on the weekend, it was 88 CNY (12.15 EUR). Both included a cash coupon of 50 CNY (6.9 EUR). As for families, a ticket for two adults and a child cost 168 CNY (23.22 EUR) on weekdays and 218 CNY (30.1 EUR) on weekends, both including a 120 CNY (16.6 EUR) cash coupon. After check-in, guests were given green paper bracelets from the staff to indicate they were paid for. Guests could enjoy any of the activities provided and arranged on the farm between nine in the morning to seven in the evening [Table 7], but some of them required appointments and extra costs.



Source: Push notice from the DH official account of WeChat (2016)



Figure 47 The new entrance of the DH farm

Source: Author's photograph (2016)

Table 7 The detailed arrangement for the "CountryFunFair 2016"

Time	Activities	Appointment	Price
09:00	Animal Art	unnecessary	50-80 RMB per person
09:00	Village Hunt	unnecessary	Free
09:00	Sports Meeting in the Field	unnecessary	Free
10:30	Bakery	necessary	70 RMB per person
12:00	Rice Field Restaurant		
13:00	Homespun Cloth of Chongming	necessary	40 RMB per person
14:00	Traditional Bakery	necessary	90 RMB per person
14:00	Traditional Drama of Chongming	necessary	30 RMB per person
14:30	Traditional Bamboo Weaving	necessary	40 RMB per person
14:30	Art with Vegetables	necessary	30 RMB per person
15:00	Let's Harvest!	necessary	50 RMB per person
18:00	Barbecue Party		
19:00	Movies in the Greenhouse	unnecessary	Free

Source: Push notice from the DH official account of WeChat (2016)

### ■ An Old Female Visitor

The late autumn sun was very bright and kept the day hot. Most of the tourists at the entrance to the DH farm seemed excited, though an old woman sitting alone in the shade seemed bored. She sat on an unlocked tricycle parked close to the entrance and a white ponytail hung from the back of her head. Another old lady, looking to be in her late sixties, accompanying her children on the

farm, walked into the shade and asked, “Where are you from? Why have you come to Xianqiao for the weekend?”

With a sigh, the lady with a white ponytail answered, “I’ve come with my son, daughter in law and my grandson. They booked rooms in the DH, so that we we’re going to spend the night here.” It turned out she was waiting for staff to pick her up and bring her to the hotel room from the farm, as the rest of her family had already entered the farm.

“Why didn’t you go and join the rest of your family on the farm,” the old lady asked.

“It is so expensive,” she replied, “and I feel less interested. I was so confused why the young people like it here. I would prefer to spend the rest of the day off and rest in my room.”

The old lady agreed with the thoughts. She added that even though she did not share the same perspectives as younger parents nowadays, she still felt the choice for how to spend the weekend with family was limited. Although the tickets were expensive, it was much better to spend the day out in nature than in front of a TV or aimlessly sauntering around a mall.

### ■ **Lunch in the Greenhouse**

Half past one in the afternoon, the rice fields already looked golden yellow under the sun. Many activities started early in the morning and finished by noon, so lots of guests who had not arrived so early went directly through the fields and headed to the hall in one of the greenhouses. A mud trail led to the hall, lined with hogweed on either side. Art installations without much decoration were placed at random along the path, extending deep into the rice fields where several galleries were set up. By the trail, the staff responsible for the “Village Hunt” warmly invited guests to join the game and reminded them that all the prizes were still available, waiting for someone to win. However, not many guests stopped for the “Village Hunt”, preferring to go straight to the greenhouse that had been transformed into a multi-functional hall, where they were serving food. An exhibition [Figure 48] of agriculture and local culture was arranged near the entrance, instead of the dining tables. A variety of seasonal products - either produced from the DH farm or other local cooperatives- and local handicrafts could be found and bought from within the exhibition.



*Figure 48 The interior of the multi-functional greenhouse*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

The dining area, exquisitely designed, was set behind the exhibition. Simple wooden tables and chairs stood with dried branches, spikes of rice and lotus seedpods for decoration. However, not many guests had lunch in the greenhouse, likely due to the lack of tables and food. Waiters told guests that only Meal A was still available and the waiting time would be about half an hour. Without much choice, some guests reserved their meal and went back outside to some of the activities in the rice field. Others left with discontent.

One choosing to wait inside, started to chat with a young waitress. They noticed the different kinds of tableware used for serving the meals and asked about it. The waitress explained that they were serving two types of food. The formal tableware was for guests with reservations in the DH hotels, whereas the disposable dishware was for guests who only came to visit but did not plan to stay. Meanwhile, there was a group of seven or eight people sitting at a long wooden table, enjoying their meal. They must have spent the night in the DH hotel as they were served with formal tableware. One woman could not contain her excitement of having stayed in a rural hotel designed and operated by the DH. While drinking a glass of red wine, to the rest of the people at the table, she said, "No one can imagine my room last night. The sense of design actually exceeded my expectations. To be honest, though the room service was not comparable to a five-star hotel, it is still the best hotel I have ever stayed in. It feels so cozy with elaborate décor from rural materials and agricultural products." Not to be outdone, her friends sitting around her strongly invited her to visit their rooms as well.

It was a long wait for the meal, such that one became bored and walked into the back of the greenhouse, where the kitchen was. The kitchen was designed to encompass two independent spaces - inside and out - to respectively handle meal preparation and a bakery. Several staff members were working, yet seemed unskilled in cooking and preparing food, so one asked if they were DH employees. They smiled a bit shyly, answering that they were not professional waiters and cooks. Most of them were graduate students from the College of Design and Innovation Tongji University. The experience was also new to them as most of them were on the farm for the first time. They had only known it from books, lectures, and exhibitions. One of the students was excited and said, "You know what, the DH here in Xianqiao is the last project still operating among all the other experimental practices included in the book, 'Design When Everybody Designs.'" She added, "The DH already became an independent cooperative last month. There are also other similar projects planned to be implemented soon."

As one chatted with the student-staff, the meal was finally ready to served. It turned out that all the meals packed in disposable dishware were cooked and wrapped elsewhere in the village and brought to the greenhouse on a small motor tricycle, given the limited space for cooking at the greenhouse. Fortunately, all dishes provided by the DH were made from local green agricultural products in a mixed of styles, such as western salad and traditional Shanghai bouilli packaged in one meal.

### ■ Experiencing the Activities

After lunch, one planned to experience more of the activities offered. Stepping out of the greenhouse, one found a big family comprised of four parents and three kids standing in front of the greenhouse. One of the men was complaining to the others while picking at his teeth. "The information online was not accountable at all," he said, "DH is not that good, and it was a waste of time driving all those hours. We should be much careful next time when picking places on the internet."

Passing by them, one found the start of the "Village Hunt" was on the trail ten meters from the greenhouse. Since there was time left before the activities started in the afternoon, one decided to join the game. At the starting point, a staff member resembling a student stood in the noontime sun. She was very kind and explained the rules. To play, guests needed to solve the puzzles following a map designed by the DH staff members. The map showed the locations of various artworks along the walls of houses throughout Xianqiao, where answers to the puzzles were hidden. However, just based on the first and fifth puzzle, the game could take hours as one

was on the east side of the village, whereas the other was on western side. It seemed families, rather than groups of friends, were more interested in the game. Many families, consisting of three or more members, were frequently seen on the street discussing the puzzles and taking pictures of each other from time to time. They were neither competitive nor in a hurry. Instead, they enjoyed the season, casually walking through the village with the map to guide them. Adults constantly asked the children whether they were enjoying themselves or if they saw this or that. Rather than answering seriously, the children responded with joyful shouts and ran around. They actively participated in the game as there were no restrains in the countryside.

In front of a piece of art on the wall of an ordinary rural house, some families stopped, parents starting to discuss its content and asking questions of their children to evoke their thoughts, whereas others scanned the QR code beside it [Figure 49]. They scanned the QR code with their smartphones and read out the story about the image's origins. Parents guided the children to understand as much information about the image as possible, rather than emphasizing the clues designed for the "Village Hunt" hidden therein.



Figure 49 A QR code beside the artwork

One rushed back to the DH farm to make the other activities arranged in the afternoon. Unexpectedly, the staff at the spot where the "Village Hunt" started said that no one had finished yet, though the game had first started almost five hours before. The staff seemed to be exhausted, so naturally one started a chat with them while waiting for the other activities to commence. The staff member said she was currently a student at Tongji University and it was her first time visiting the DH. Though there were less visitors than in the morning, she said there had been many since early in the morning, leaving her very tired. With one's curiosity over the morning, the student continued, "Early in the morning, there was a group of seventy student-journalists visiting the farm. They spent a long time here, so all the activities arranged in the morning were almost fully booked."

"Did the professor who started and supervised the DH practice join the morning festivities?" One asked.

The student answered, " He was here yesterday and left after making sure everything was in position. He also encouraged us to experience the life in DH's hotel and farm."

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of a gong. Following the sound, guests on the farm were gathered to a temporary stage in the middle of the rice field. Children seemed unfamiliar with the sound, having barely heard it before in the urban areas, but adults knew it well and urged their kids with "Let's go and have look! There must be something about to start!" It turned out it was a performance of a local drama named "Shoulder Pole." A middle-aged man introduced the show as a famous performance in Chongming, conducted by only one person staging the dolls and singing the story. This time, it was performed by a local cultural heritage artist. As he started the show, the small stage was surrounded by children and their parents. They shouted and laughed during the performance. One did not know whether the small kids could follow the storyline or not, since it was sung in a local dialect, but they seemed to enjoy it anyway. The performance lasted twenty minutes. The highlight came just after the artist had finished as he came out and offered opportunities for the audience to take a role in the drama he had performed. Although the dolls were simple and less exquisite, this did not damp the kids' enthusiasm. They showed a strong interest in participating as they shouted and giggled. The artist, thus, had to extend the time for role-playing, so that almost all the kids had a turn [Figure 50]. Some children were so excited that they even waited several turns to try out different characters.



*Figure 50 The shoulder pole drama was performing in the rice field of the DH*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

As the show drew to a close, a familiar individual, the head of Xianqiao, was seen on the farm, standing alone in the crowd and casually looking around from time to time. Instead of playing any significant role or attracting attention, she quietly mingled with the guests as if she were one

of them. At the same time, there was a noise high up in the sky growing louder and louder. It grew so loud that almost everyone in the fields looked up to find out what it was, which turned out to be a video drone flying overhead, documenting the activities. Several people wearing the uniform of a local TV station stood close to the greenhouses, controlling the drone. At that time, a harvest competition was about to take place on a neighboring plot of rice field.



*Figure 51 The harvest competition in the rice field*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

Many people went to the harvest competition right after the show. There were some traditional tools – sickles – lined up alongside the rice field. A member of the staff explained the rules of rice-harvesting while picking up a sickle. He jumped off the boardwalk into the rice field and showed the guests how to harvest the rice. It seemed easy as the man seemed to enjoy himself while cutting the stalks. Some of the guests who had been hesitant felt encouraged. They had only planned to watch at first but then jumped in and tried it for themselves. They rolled up their sleeves and started to harvest rice as cheers from the other guests grew louder and louder. However, the use of a sickle turned out harder than it had seemed. Not long after the game started, only two people - a man and a woman - remained [Figure 51]. There was sweat all over their forehead and across their backs. Keeping their heads down, their breaths were heavy but intermingled with laughter as time went on. Meanwhile, the children and youth were also excited, picking up bamboo baskets, jumping into the field, and picking up the rice ears left by the harvest and scattered around the field. As they picked up the ears, the DH staff told them they had to hand the ears to a thresher as to remove the cloth from the ears, then they could bring the

rice back home. “However,” the staff said, “it would also be very cool if you want to keep the rice ears as they are.” A group of five or six children of varying ages were so excited that they rushed into the multi-functional greenhouse and started to play with their harvests. A member of the staff came up to them, asking if they had enjoyed their time picking up rice ears but emphasized: “You should not eat what you have just harvested before it has been properly treated.” The staff member then invited them to look at the thresher. The children were very happy and followed their lead. They rushed out of the greenhouse, despite their parents chasing after them and asking them to slow down.

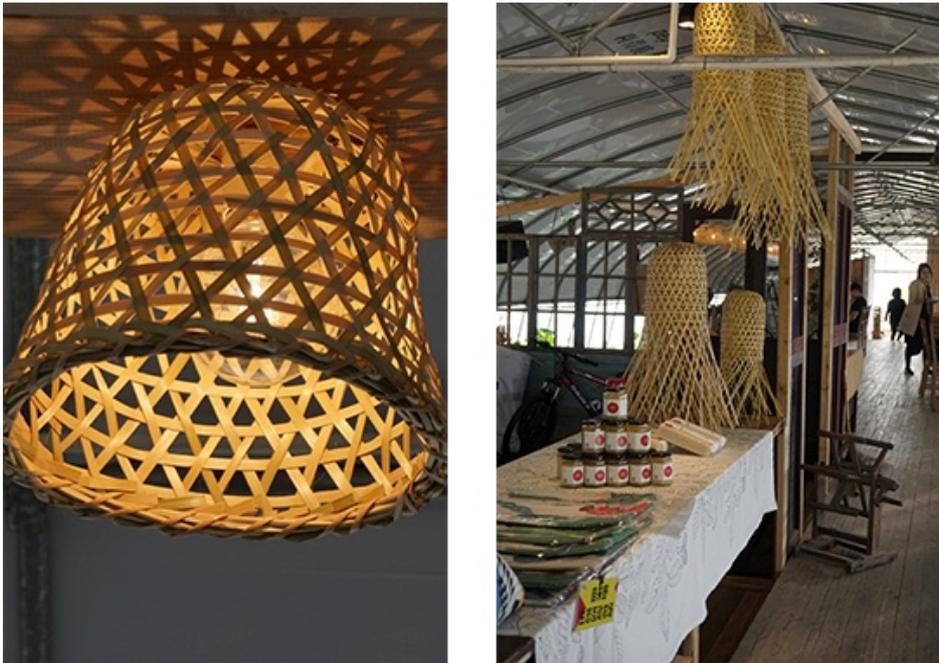


*Figure 52 A traditional bamboo weaving workshop held in the greenhouse of the DH*  
*Source: Author’s photograph (2016)*

After the rice harvest, the last activity in the afternoon, which many people had been anticipating, started. It was a workshop on traditional bamboo weaving. Many guests were early and sat on long wooden benches beside the wall of the greenhouse, waiting for the local artisan. Most of the people waiting were in their thirties and forties, some of them having brought their children along. As the workshop was to start, the place became crowded. A brown-skinned old man in his late seventies walked in. He wore old navy blue garments with a pair of green, army-style cloth shoes, typical of 1970s clothing for physical laborers in China, though a pair of red-flower-oversleeve did not seem to go with his clothes [Figure 52]. A DH staff member introduced the old man as Shi, the teacher of the workshop and a local villager. Shi used to make different containers out of bamboo for a living for decades. His family had lived on his skills, but as time passed, bamboo containers were no longer important in people’s daily life anymore, so he had to search for other means of making money. At present, his job was to teach in the DH studio and make bamboo decorations for the DH spaces [Figure 53].

Then the workshop started. Shi taught the guests how to make small bamboo baskets, which had been used for carrying fruits and vegetables in the old days. With his heavy accent that, guests found it difficult to understand him, requiring the assistance of staff members to elaborate. Even with step-by-step instructions, though, making small bamboo baskets was not an easy skill to learn. At the start, everyone attending was ambitious and confident that they could make their own. However, the edges of the bamboo were so sharp that the guests had to be careful in weaving them into specific shapes. Some of the guests stopped after having formed a bamboo net, finding it too hard to bend the net into a fixed shape without breaking it or cutting their hands. One guest cried, "It is too hard!" and some others murmured, "I know I can do it, but it does not work out." Other guests gradually collected into pairs or groups of three, so they could study together and concentrate on only making one basket.

The village artisan was very skilled. He illustrated the process of making a basket as he walked about and helped them with their works. His hands, covered in thick calluses, managed the sharp strips of bamboo softly as if they were threads of cotton. One lady of short hair with a pair of sunglasses atop her head persisted and followed his instructions from start to end by herself. She even started to teach her friends around her, and they turned out to be a group of designers. At last, many groups of guests finished at least one basket with the help of the teacher and the DH staff, and those that did not finish enjoyed learning the process and their semi-accomplished products.



*Figure 53 Bamboo decorations in the multi-functional greenhouse of the DH*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

### **Vignette 3: A Booked Weekend**

Spring arrived. It was the last weekend between the end of March and the beginning of April, 2018, when the Qingming festival was approaching. Days became warmer and longer, the wind softer, and people started to go out. Xianqiao Village was as clean as usual. The small wind fans atop the streetlights were turning. At this time of year, people felt comfortable to walk around the village, so more came out. They either talked or worked in their small yards in front or at the back of their houses. Electric motorcycles and pick-up trucks frequently came in and out of the village, bearing farming tools, dry wooden branches, fresh flowers and the like.

On this particular weekend, no vehicles lined the street, despite the DH hotels and activities booked. There were only three to four cars parked at the entrance to the DH farm, whereas every once in a while, small electric tour buses travelled between the hotels and the farm, picking up guests. The paddy would not be planted until late April, so the rice field was randomly arranged, and a new art installation of a rainbow was placed beside the entrance.

A couple of elderly women stood at the entrance, chatting. One drew near and asked if they had a good time on the farm. "There's grass everywhere," one lady answered, shaking her head, "I see no interest in the farm."

"Are there many tourists," one persisted.

"Tourists visited the farm frequently," she said and pointed at her house. "I lived just across the street."

"So are you a villager here?"

"Yes, I am. The farm is on our land." She looked to the other elderly woman. It turned out these women were sisters, one was 67 and the other 71. They rented their land to the DH.

So one asked, "How does that work? Do the village representatives help with the rent issues?"

"No, they discussed it with us first."

"How long is the leasing contract valid then?"

Both ladies laughed then. They seemed a bit shy to answer. “The contract is at home,” one of them said, “I really do not remember. It should be fifteen years or thirty years.” They continued smiling. She then said that her sons were working in urban Shanghai and would not come back, so she could not take care of her farmland. Suddenly, she became a bit mad, pointing at her newly constructed wall and murmured, “There are so many tourists visiting the farm nowadays. They always turn their cars in my front yard, so I had to block the way and make them do it somewhere else.”

Thanking them, one then walked into the farm. Six adults stood along the trail, which was then painted with new artworks and extended to the greenhouses, with a pair of tourists standing on the boardwalks in the rice field. They were flying kites and chatting in Cantonese. Approaching them, one asked if they were from Guangdong. Of the pair, a young woman answered that they did not come from southern China and that they worked and lived in Shanghai.

“How do you know the place,” one continued.

“Our friends visited before, and they took us here.” They had also brought their children with them, the youngest being only several months old.

Instead of stopping, continuing on to the greenhouse, one found two guests near the door, weaving bamboo baskets under Shi’s directions, three finished baskets set aside beside them. Meanwhile, one of the guests rushed into the greenhouse. She started to pack up the bread she had baked, which had been set on trays on the table. To the DH staff and another lady at the next table, she said, “We could share some of the bread with others if there are any who want it. There is still much bread left here.” The lady standing at the next table, who seemed around thirty, agreed as she continued working on something else. It turned out she was drawing a kite. Curious, one asked how they made the kites and she proudly replied that while the staff prepared them, guests designed their own [Figure 54].



*Figure 54 Weekend activities in the DH farm*

*Source: Authors' photograph (2018)*

One strode towards the back of the greenhouse, where several staff members who seemed like local villagers were busy preparing vegetables for a barbecue in the evening. It seemed the barbecue was being prepared for guests who had booked the DH hotels. Recognizing one of the staff, one was happy to see someone familiar and was invited to join the events the next weekend during the Qingming Festival, but to book in advance as April to October was the village's tourist season. Thanking them for their kind invitation, one asked, "Some pictures are there hanging in the front of the greenhouse, showing some left-behind children attending the DH activities. Is it a regular program?"

"Yes," she answered proudly, "The activity is organized by the Communist Youth League about twice a year. Moreover, we have been working closely with the schools around Xianqiao as well, especially during the summer holidays. We only charge basic costs for organizing these activities."

#### **Vignette 4: The Products and Sales Network**

Around December of 2016, one received an invitation on Wechat to join the group organized by the DH project manager. It was a surprise to find that there were already approximately 350 members, though they did not communicate most of the time. Until one weekend, the DH manager started a sales activity to promote DH products, making many members active. The rice set was the first product on sale. As soon as it was promoted, there was a heated discussion in the group. The discounted price was still higher than the regular organic rice sold in markets, but people in the group seemed pretty satisfied with it. They were familiar with DH and the manager as well. Soon, a dozen rice set were bought. Following thereafter were sales of rice wine and sweet fermented rice among others.

“The wine is nice,” one member said, “can it be sent to Beijing?”

“Yes,” the manager replied, “but I will have to check the price of shipping and get back to you.”

“I like the sweet fermented rice so much, it was delicious the last time I bought it. How long would it take to be delivered, if I order now?”

“The sweet fermented rice cannot be kept long, so we have to produce it according to orders. As long as a certain number of customers reserve it, then we will start to make the sweet rice in a traditional Chinese clay tank. It will take three days to prepare it before we can make a delivery.”

People chatting in the group had tried the products before and knew the quality well. The questions discussed, therefore were mainly in regard to methods of delivery and time, and if delivery could reach a certain area before a specified time.

Whenever new products went on sale, orders were made one after another. Nearly every day, there were orders for the sweet fermented rice. It was a seasonal product made of newly harvested rice, but was only available from December to February. The rice wine was sold out in about two weeks, regardless whether it was on sale or not. The manager comforted people interested in the wine, telling them she could accept new orders but it would take a month before the product could be delivered. Though the products often required some time for preparation and the prices were comparatively higher than similar products in the market, the most common comments in the group were “These products were so good that I need several more for my friends,” and “What a pity that it has been sold out, could I book some from the next batch?” No one ever complained.

The promotion of the products offered with a discount continued on through the week. Afterwards, the price returned to normal. However, the products sold were not only produced by DH but also by other rural cooperatives in Xianqiao. The main agricultural products produced by DH were rice and those made from it, as in rice wine, sweet fermented rice and so forth. The products offered by the other cooperatives were mainly vegetables and fruits, the quality of which was checked by DH in advance.

## Discussion

- (1) Traditional agriculture, local culture, and the concept of design were the defining characteristics of the experiences provided by DH. Among them, design is the most critical, influencing and assembling all thoughts and projects.
- (2) Though DH was derived from an independent company, the support from academia, especially the professor who initiated the project, was still considerable.
- (3) Local authorities, mainly referring to the village leader and representatives, had less of an effect on the development of DH.
- (4) Other rural cooperatives in Xianqiao were invited to join DH-organized activities through various forms.
- (5) Families with children and people in their thirties and forties with a certain sense of design comprised a major part of DH's fanbase.
- (6) Villagers felt free to visit and enjoy the DH farm's environment compared to the other gated rural cooperatives, but unfortunately could hardly appreciate it.
- (7) Local villagers, as well as urban guests, though not limited to them alone, possessed polarized attitudes towards DH.
- (8) Current guests can be roughly divided between two main categories. Many guests were those who worked closely with or were interested in design, as most of the DH projects were designed, implemented, even operated by designers, some of whom held significant standing both at home and abroad. If not designers, other guests were fans of outdoor activities, interested in new experiences. They found DH online, normally traveling in groups of friends, family members or colleagues.
- (9) DH also participated in regional and local social affairs.
- (10) The regular activities and the seasonal events provided by DH affected Xianqiao differently.
- (11) The DH's concept was spread throughout events and activities, though people's understandings were exclusive to each individual.
- (12) The quality of agricultural products from the DH farm is good. This comment is not only evidenced by the conversations in the DH's Wechat group but also by one's personal experiences. Most of the products promoted in the group were tried several times. The quality was at least as good as similar products on the market. Deliveries were on time as promised for each order and well-packaged.
- (13) The cost of the products and rural experiences provided by DH matched the consumption of people with a high income.

### **5.4.3 Local Impacts Beyond the “DESIGN Harvests”**

#### **Vignette 5: An Agritainment Run by A Local Villager**

At noon, led by a friend, one ventured into an agritainment run by one of the villagers. It was located beside the DH farm with the entrance on the east side of its yard, close to a narrow single-car street along the river. There was no sign at the entrance, so the house was easily ignored and recognized the same as any other rural house, rather than seeming like an operating agritainment.

The hostess warmly welcomed her guests into the dining room on the ground floor, speaking Mandarin with a Chongming accent. The dining room was dark and not particularly decorated. Two round tables seemed to crowd the room. A narrow corridor led from the dining room to the guest rooms with a shared washroom on either side. The guest rooms were small and dark with decorations. Each room had two singles with simple beddings.

As one toured around for less than ten minutes, the food was gradually brought out to the table. The hostess called her guests back to the table and started to introduce each dish with care. “These were all made with fresh foods just picked from the field. They are all organic and homemade. The fish are small but tasty, since they were caught from the river this morning.” She continued, “I was playing mahjong when the village secretary called me (and told me) that some customers were looking for a place to eat.” Curious, one asked if the DH activities increased her business as there were weekend activities on the DH farm. She answered in the negative, saying her business was not connected to DH.

Surprised, one asked, “So when there is a big event, none of the tourists come to your place?”

She answered, “Yes, the village secretary will inform us ahead of time, so we can be prepared.”

“How can people find your place?”

“Sometimes, the secretary will introduce some clients to us. I also posted my business online and once people taste my food, they tell their friends. I have already gotten over four hundred customers on Wechat. Since I do not hire any chef, this business is enough for me.”

One then asked if people liked to stay. The hostess seemed proud as she replied, “Yes, the rooms for Qingming, a traditional Chinese festival, are booked out. It is cheaper than the rural hotels.

One room costs only 110 CNY (about 14 EUR) on regular days and 130 CNY (about 17 EUR) for festivals, but for Spring Festivals, I will raise the price to 160 CNY (about 20 EUR) per day as many tourists from Shanghai will come.”

Once lunch was finished, the hostess walked along with one out of the dining room and said, “Though I started my business back in 2015, which was later than the other agritainments in the village, I have always kept the quality of my services. I am now ahead of them, and the secretary always introduces customers to my place.” She walked out to the entrance of her yard, while waiting a pick-up from the locale. Waiting, one observed a deck of wood, a huge sun umbrella and a swinging chair inappropriately arranged in the yard, which did not match the lack of decoration in the place. Pointing to the furniture in the yard, one asked the hostess about them. She said they were given by Chongming District to all agritainment and rural hotels for free. “There are also extra subsidies for us announced online by the official media this year, but I have not received them yet. I will keep following the information.” Said the hostess with delight as she took out her smartphone, showing the official notice.

### **Vignette 6: A Visiting Scholar and His Experiment**

It was the eighteenth of June 2016. The weather was hot, the sun getting stronger and stronger in the summer. A new face was seen working on the DH farm. He was a visiting scholar, wearing a typical farmer’s straw hat and helping out with the work. The sweat dripped off his forehead and seeped out of his shirt. Since he had already been interviewed over the phone, though not met in person yet, he became familiar soon after a brief introduction. He made a proud invitation to visit his own project by the street. He pointed out, in front of Tiangeng, saying, “The DH practice inspired me. It was a good experience learning at Tongji as I could know the DH practice more in-depth. I wanted to learn as much as possible and bring my knowledge and experiences back to my university. I also plan to practice the concept whenever I have a chance.”



*Figure 55 The visiting scholar's home - The seaside No. 1 experiment space of garden house*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2018)*

Bidding farewell to the scholar, one went over to the project he mentioned [Figure 55]. The entrance was formed from a dwarf brick wall and wooden doors. The front yard was locked in a traditional manner with a wooden stick lain horizontally against the middle. A wooden pergola was built in front of the house, covering the front yard and turning it into a semi-outdoor space. The new building was a one-floor house constructed from locally-sourced red bricks. The roof was covered with red tiles, another local element. The facade was neither painted nor paved, rather than it was decorated with varying brickworks. The windows were small and narrow, typical of modern styles. This new construction stood out on the street. Then one remembered that a house had been demolished in front of Tiangeng several months ago, which turned out to be the scholar's ongoing project.

### **Discussion**

- (1) DH and the local agritainment provided various rural activities and services for different kinds of customers. They were not offering homogenous experiences.
- (2) DH, as a regional calling card, attracts more tourists than before and villagers share some of the benefits, not fully aware of it.
- (3) The village secretary has been playing a critical part in the development of Xianqiao in various ways.
- (4) Direct support from the local official for the development of tourism in Chongming has been increasing year by year.
- (5) Subconsciously, many villagers did not consider Chongming to be part of Shanghai.
- (6) The visiting scholar who learned from his experiences with DH realized his rural dream in Xianqiao, though he did not seem to fully ingest the guiding concept of DH as demolition was never one of their approaches.
- (7) The DH concepts and experiences for rural revitalization and transformation had spread through different exploratory practices they inspired.

### **5.5 Preliminary Conclusion**

The exploratory practice in Xianqiao Village originated from pure academic research, which was neither affected by pressure for practical implementations nor the image of local authorities. It was later put into practice voluntarily by the researchers involved. Take, for instance, the current project manager who first participated as a graduate student during the research stage of the practice. She believed in its concept and contributed to the implementation after her graduation. Though the involvement of a large number of students with little understanding of rural living

led to a romantic idealism in planning and design, the original vision for Xianqiao of a village where people could better know rural possibilities through design was realized step by step.

The DH practice applied a variety of means for spatial intervention to creatively transform some rural spaces, while retaining indigenous features, including the multi-functional greenhouse and residential houses among others since 2010. It also reconnected the village to broader networks by emphasizing agricultural products and rural interactions. Without massive reconstructions of existing spaces in the village, the DH, on one hand, allowed Xianqiao to preserve its strong local identity, while on the other hand, provided valuable experiences for rural revitalization and transformation using alternative approaches. It is considered valuable since there were countless cases of local development in rural transformations resulting in the waste of public finance, given the lack of awareness of local requirements and daily habits [Figure 56].



*Figure 56 An example of new rural space construction directed by insufficient understanding of rural context*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

The realization of the DH's research plan in Xianqiao started from the transformation of an empty rural house. As the DH brand became well-known, attracting more and more tourists, the DH gradually and accordingly increased the scale of its constituent projects to six greenhouses and four rural hotels in 2018 and varieties of activities. From a research-oriented project to a dependent company branch and finally into an independent company with its own brand, DH took two years of field research and six years of implementation and operation to develop. The practice also expanded to other rural areas, as in Wuxi and Changzhou in the Yangtze River Delta. In 2016, three local youths between twenty and thirty who had been working in the urban area returned to their hometown and started to work full-time for DH. Respectively, they were in

charge of the farm, hotel management, and organizing activities. Some local farmers, normally above fifty, were hired as temporary labors when seasonal farming demanded.

Based on the knowledge hitherto regarding DH, some important and advanced concepts and approaches for rural transformation are worth highlighting. Firstly, DH conceived a new concept concerning urban-rural interactions during research and experimentally realized the concept through alternative approach, rather than normative approaches, to rural spatial intervention. The concept constructed a base of mutual understanding and flow between the rural and urban. Respecting not only the local, natural and spatial context, it more importantly paid respect to the interaction between humans and nature and the relationship of agricultural production therein. This respect led to the development of small-scale eco-agriculture, combined with rural tourism. This strategy for tourism was not only valued as an important development for the local economy but also for deliberate combination of agricultural products, local and rural culture, so that the original concept was realized. This was delightedly observed in the field when tourist activity and agriculture production were effectively combined to complement one another along dimensions of time and the space. Moreover, the practice emphasized improvement of local agriculture from quantity-oriented to quality-oriented, increasing the value-added without much changing the “outfits” of rural areas. The thought of design reflected and highlighted throughout the DH practice further increased the value-added from its products, as well as its services. This provided the possibility of achieving a certain amount of profit, given less human labor and without demolition. It is specifically valuable regarding the real challenge of a shrinking population in general and the lack of people who practice farming, thereby increasing the value of the practice in extending the concept and its experiences to a broader area.

Following the concept, a simple retail platform was established on a popular social media platform, an experience worth learning from. The project manager invited people with genuine interests in DH to the group as more and more people came to know of the project through differing channels, such as exhibitions, internet advertisement (particularly through social media) and first-hand experience among others. The platform was thus established and people interested in the project, some of whom truly understood and supported its concept, were added in. It instantly and efficiently connected with potential customers with little cost. The activities and products were advertised and sold with less cost in a more straightforward way. This also helped to spread the practice and related information to more and more people, while attaining instant feedback. More importantly, however, use of the platform was not limited to the DH, but reaching to other credible cooperatives in the village, it helped to promote their products, using

the same client-resource network. This both strengthened the local cooperation between different agricultural businesses and complemented the DH farm's seasonal shortage of products.

Apart from concept and sales, DH offered educative activities and adopted some social responsibilities. Though it did not belong to governmental administration, it worked with the Communist Youth League, providing places and regular activities for children. It also worked closely with schools in the local region to enrich extracurricular activities.

Last but not least, becoming a regional calling card, DH attracted more and more attention to Xianqiao Village, leading to new development initiatives, taken up by the local authorities, tourists, academic scholars, artists and more importantly, some of the native residents. Some artists, scholars and tourists started to realize their rural visions in Xianqiao, while a small number of villagers came back to the village and joined the DH practice. More and more villagers ran their own businesses, sharing in the benefits resulting from DH's fame. Xianqiao Village was no longer an ordinary village hardly seen on the map. Not only did it stand out on regional maps but even on the international stage. Although previous public investment in Xianqiao helped with upgrades to the infrastructure, public services and forming better local cooperative mechanisms, the DH built on these positive effects, attracting numerous new actors to the local, establishing reciprocal relationships and stimulating the emerging dynamics.

Despite the positive outcomes from the DH practice, there remain some critical issues to be recognized and discussed with regard to changes, their effects and sustainability of the eight-year practice. For one, discussion of the DH practice only included the villagers in the last phase of implementation. The DH practice was conducted on a village whose development had been protected and limited by a specific municipal agenda. It received a program of service upgrades from the local government. At approximately the same time, local authorities also recommended Xianqiao to the professor leading the practice. In the process of decision-making, including conceptualization and planning, the villagers were not considered to be vital actors. Only in the implementation phase, while discussing issues with leasing land, did they become involved [Figure 57]. Thus two reasonable questions must be asked: "Did these implementations respond to best fulfill the needs of the villagers," and "Could the practice have continued to follow the current strategy of transformation without the restraints and subsidies of regional development?" The answers to these questions are critical to the replication of these experiences.

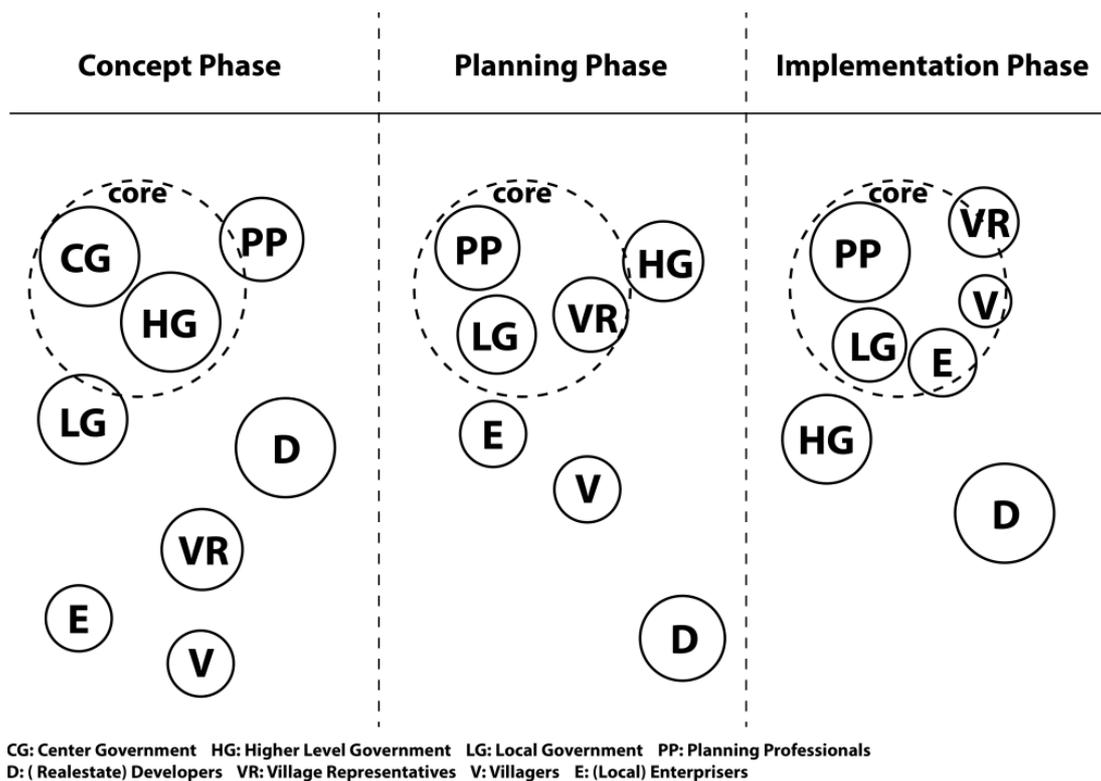


Figure 57 Actors' engagement and their shifting roles at different phases

Source: Author's construct

An annual income of 15, 000 CYN (about 2,070 EUR) per hectare per year for leasing land was minimal for supporting villagers' livelihoods. Most villagers thus had to leave the village to supplement their incomes. "Even though the local rural cooperatives hired some (about sixty) farmers," reported the village head, "many villagers still have no jobs. They have to go out and find jobs in urban Shanghai. Leaving their comfortable houses on the island and going to urban Shanghai is against their will." In an interview, a male villager said, "I have been working in Shanghai for years and got hurt in an accident, so I had to come back. My children would like to come back to the village too, but there are no jobs." There is an obvious collision between the regional development and the villagers' needs. In this sense, one cannot predict the certainty of whether the villagers' support will remain if the official eco-development plan is no longer an option, or if the government should shift its focus in other directions? In other words, if more favorable development approaches for income and job opportunities were allowed at the policy level, the question would be whether or not the villagers would reject the DH's approaches. This makes its sustainability questionable. To consider it further, if the villagers could be more involved and benefit more from the newly introduced projects, rather than just leasing land and acquiring temporary jobs once in a while, perhaps the tension would diminish.

The success of the DH practice in Xianqiao attracted many practitioners, as well as speculators who wanted to enjoy some of the benefits from the already established fame, or share in the same vision of rural development. For instance, there were professionals already there to realize their dreams, renting, destroying and reconstructing local houses to be more modern. Companies began investing in the village to construct rural hotels, fancy restaurants, a big parking lot and so on. These effects were unpredicted but have aroused reasonable concern as destruction was never part of the DH's concept of transformation. The people responsible for enacting these projects may not genuinely understand the concept of DH's development. Village representatives, though once urgent to promote rural tourism, are less likely to guide these kinds of projects. The research has thus concluded that the DH practice still lacks a substantial effect on locals' understanding and local development frameworks. Whether DH will lead to a sustainable and brighter future, or attract more demolition projects to use Xianqiao as experimental grounds is so far hard to discern.

Given the loss of local labor and unwanted investment, there has also begun an invasion of foreign values. It is not hard to conceive that the eco-grown food and eco-friendly rural tourism represent a certain kind of value and consumer tendency. This set of values is not derived specifically from the rural context. Instead, it grew out of increasing demand from urban residents. For instance, the costs of the DH rural hotels and agriculture products are only affordable to those of a certain income level. Similarly, arts and design are also comprised in great part an element introduced and emphasized by the DH practice. While arts and design were powerful assets in increasing urban-rural interactions, they are not easily appreciated. This was also indicated in the fieldwork, seeing how guests possessed conflicting attitudes towards DH. This would, in turn, explain why, regardless of growing tourism opportunities brought in by DH, the locals' efforts to share the opportunities are limited. The villagers did not and could not fully understand the values attached to the experiences and products that the DH provided. Put another way, the DH's approaches to rural transformation were based on traditional farming, while loading in and sustaining a value formed in urban areas that was still unfamiliar to the native residents. If the villagers could not understand the value, then perhaps they would be again ruled out of the future efforts, leading to a greater depression.

Lastly, the most critical point of all was whether or not the underlying elements responsible for the success of the practice could be replicated. Its success not only relied on the design and development of its concept but other key factors as well. One was the local initiatives. Though Xianqiao was always described as an ordinary village, this was not a precise description. The

secretary of the village was honored as the Shanghai Model Worker. He was a man with vision and ability, as well as the resources to fight for the village, and was thus one of the reasons Xianqiao was chosen to be first among several villages for the implementation of eco-energy driven infrastructure and the upgrade to public services. Where other village representatives hesitated, he dare to take chances. In much the same sense, another key factor was the leader of the practice itself, the professor who initiated the project. He exhibited the project at a domestic and international level, as well as organized international events among the DH projects. Hence, these intangible resources, namely these super-connected individuals, should also be taken into consideration for their part in the success of DH. Without these key people, it is hard to determine whether or not the experiences of this exploratory practice would work out for rural transformations in other villages.

As the professor leading the DH said, "The DH has hitherto not realized the original vision of its plan and is now more like a youth entrepreneurship project. The real success of the project was to encourage the formation of a huge group of innovative communities to inspire broader social innovations-taking sustainability as an objective, using design to re-define life, the value of life and the model of production." He still remained a very positive attitude towards the practice in Xianqiao, having estimated from the beginning that the project would require at least twenty years to reach its final goal. He also emphasized the inclusion of the designers and artists in rural development, stating, "We also invited many artists to join our DH practice. Arts can arouse consciousness deep inside our minds. It can feel helpless to face a lot of significant and practical challenges but it is not the artist's work to solve the problems" (Sina News 2017).

## Chapter 6: Case Study of Shatan Village: the “Beautiful Villages Construction”

### 6.1 Regional Overview and Background of Shatan

Shatan Village is geographically situated in eastern Zhejiang Province [Figure 58] within the YRD as part of a mountainous region, where regional development is not as prominent as in the neighboring areas of the northern plains, though they are all affected by the globalization, economic growth and urban expansion taking place in the YRD. The rolling hills encompassing this village have constrained local efforts for development and urbanization in numerous ways, even though it lies in one of the most developed regions of China.

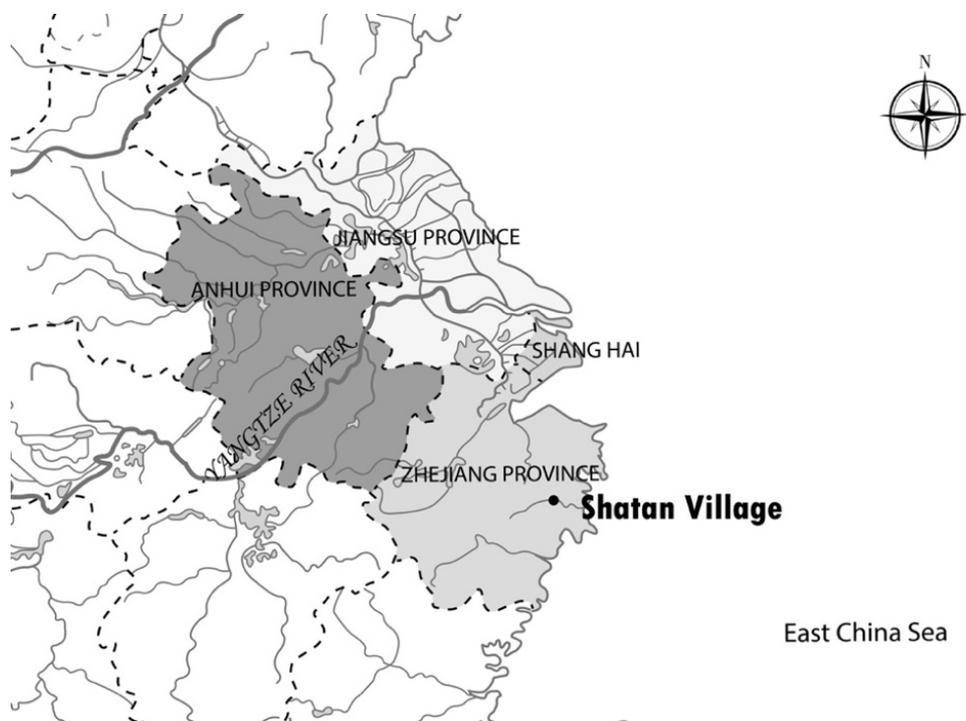


Figure 58 Geographic location of Shatan Village in the YRD

Source: Author's construction

According to administrative hierarchy, Shatan belongs to the Yutou Township of Huangyan District in the municipality of Taizhou. Huangyan District is considered average in scale with the local population only numbering 709.3 thousand in 2015. Its main industry is plastic modeling, assembled in the urban area and spread through the rural. However, compared to other districts of Taizhou, Huangyan's natural environment can be considered superior. According to the “Taizhou Mater Plan (2004-2020) 2016 Revision”(Taizhou Municipal People's Government, 2016), Huangyan was designated a livable district and the urban leisure center of Taizhou with

nice landscapes of rivers and mountains. Its advantages in natural resources, ecological environment and livability were again underscored in the “Thirteen Fifth Urban-Rural Development Strategy Plan of Huangyan District.” Accordingly, in the “Space Development Control 2016 of Taizhou” [Figure 59], Huangyan was divided into two parts: the eastern plain close to the Taizhou central urban area and the western mountainous region mainly composed of villages.

Different development strategies and policies were conceived given the differences in spatial features and relationships. For instance, the land in the western region was strictly limited in construction compared to the east. While Shatan Village is in the western area covered by mountains, it is also close to the Changtan Reservoir, which supplies the drinking water of Huangyan. These natural barriers limited development in Shatan, weakening the impacts of development in neighboring areas. At the same time, discriminative regional development policies restrained opportunities and options for village’s development. Thus, the path of local development, the culture and value hitherto was primarily affected by indigenous agriculture and Taoist culture. The villagers, as noted in the interviews, firmly believed they were the offspring of guardians safeguarding the youth hero who died fighting a fire hundreds of years ago. They were convinced that a temple enshrining the status of the hero and other Taoism gods was the origin of their village, and have been watching over their homes since the Song Dynasty (1259).

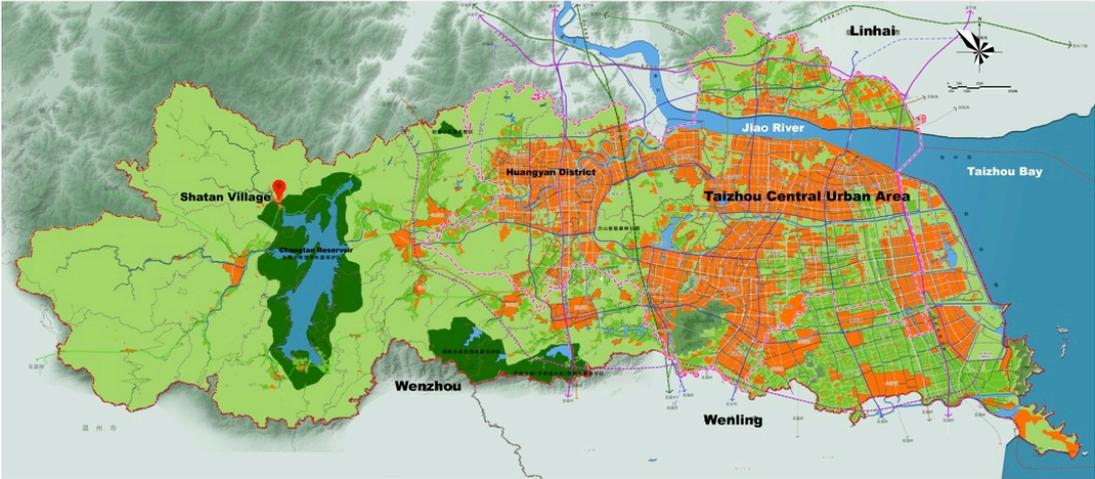


Figure 59 The spatial control of Taizhou planning area  
 Source: The Master Plan of Taizhou (2004-2020) 2016 Revision

## 6.2 The Evolution of Rural Urbanization and Current Challenges

### 6.2.1 Accessibility

The road density of highway connections throughout the YRD is much higher in northern regions than the southern regions as shown in Figure 60 below. To some extent, this reflects the variety of development levels in the whole region. From Shanghai, the most developed municipality in the YRD to Taizhou, the municipality Shatan belongs to, it takes a nearly five-hour drive to cross, as well as an additional hour for reaching the village deep in the valley. The two-lane road to Shatan was narrow, winding from the urban area to protect the reservoir. To increase the accessibility of the towns and villages located deep in the west mountainous area, a new road was approved by the local government in 2016 for construction alongside the reservoir. The new road was completed in 2018. The aim was to ease traffic for western residents, whether urban or rural, shortening the travel time between Shatan and the main metropolitan area to within half an hour.

In addition to the road, a high-speed rail connecting Shanghai, Ningbo, Taizhou and Wenzhou had been operating since 2011. The high-speed rail station for Taizhou was located in the Huangyan District [Figure 61], largely shortening the time to commute time between Huangyan and other urban centers in the YRD. For example, from Huangyan to Shanghai only took three hours.



Figure 60 Regional transportation connections of Taizhou Municipality

Source: Author's own construction based on OpenStreetMap



Figure 61 Regional transportation connections of Shatan Village

Source: Author's construction based on the Master Plan of Taizhou (2004-2020) 2016 Revision

## 6.2.2 Trajectory of Socioeconomic Development and Spatial Evolvement

As an administrative village, the smallest unit of governance for rural autonomy in China, Shatan is comparatively larger than its neighboring villages and most public services were stationed in this village. It is 191.3 hectares in size with a construction area of 27.25 ha according to the Yutou Township Land Use Master Plan. There is a well-known saying in this region, “Nine mountains, half [a] river, half [a] farm,” which accurately describes the natural environment and the relationship between people and the land in this area [Figure 62], primarily affecting the formation of its layout, as well as indicating the physical barriers that weakened external influences in the past. The registered population of Shatan was 1097, yet only 952 residents from among 267 households lived in the village on a consistent basis by the end of 2012, among which the number comprising the labor force was 714 (G. Yang, Dai, and Zhong 2005, 33). By the end of 2015, the registered population increased to 1122, though the number of residents dropped to 872 among 305 households, among which only 594 were labor force (Shanghai Tongji Urban Planning and Design Institute 2016, 5).



Figure 62 The skyline of Shatan Village

Source: Author's photograph (2016)

For a long time, the villagers relied mainly on farming, fishing and picking fruits and vegetables from the surrounding mountains, even while in 1995 when the rural industry started and the economic and social structure of the region began to change. Development of the rural industry was significantly affected by the increasing agglomeration of the plastic mold manufacturing in the urban Huangyan area, resulting from industry globalization. Plastic mold factories were, thus, quickly established in Shatan with the village head owning a significant portion of them. These factories provided a lot more job opportunities but caused server pollution in the environment. According to a local investigation, by August 2013, there were eleven rural enterprises in Shatan, including the plastic mold and paper industries, providing 200 jobs at a total valued of close to ninety million CNY (approximately 7.5 million EUR) in yearly production (G. Yang, Dai, and Zhong 2005, 41). Thus, the rural industries and agriculture have hitherto constituted the main part of the local economy.

Accordingly, the industrialization of Shatan affected its spatial structure. Large industrial buildings that did not blend in with the original rural buildings were constructed [Figure 63]. The spatial organization pattern was further destroyed by the new rural development strategy (SNV), resulting in the planned demolition and construction of new large-scale structures thereafter. The initial development plan directed by the SNV was to destroy the whole village, and construct a brand new village with rural apartments and urban parks as new public spaces [Figure 64, 65]. The new village has been under construction since 2005 at the eastern end of the village, close to the township’s government office building.

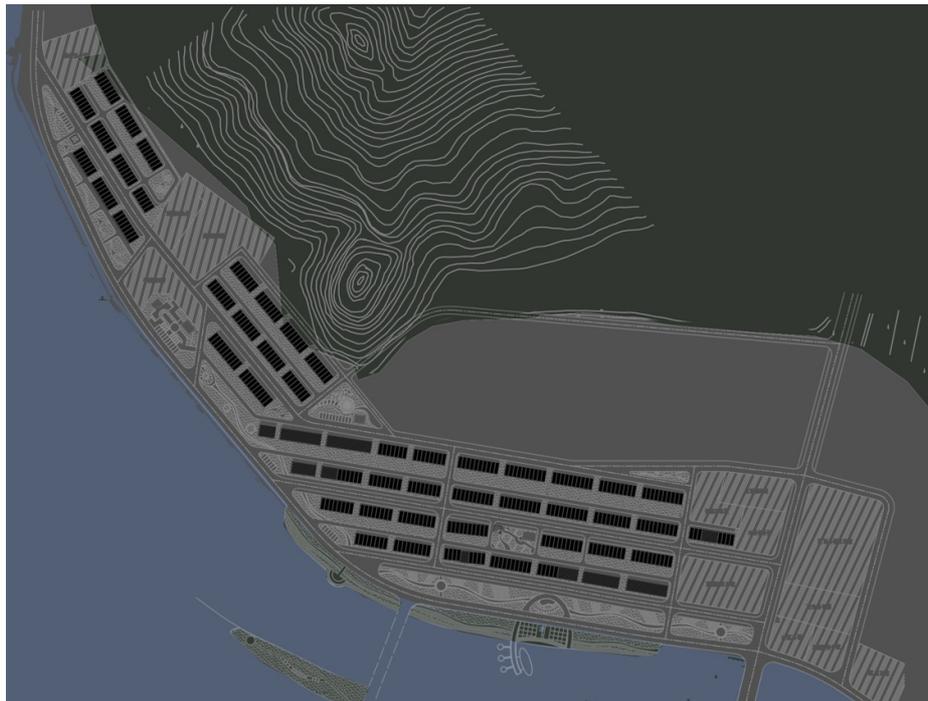


Figure 63 The current spatial arrangement of Shatan Village  
 Source: Author’s construction based on Baidu Map (2019)



*Figure 64 The spatial arrangement of Shatan Village before 2004*

*Source: Author's construction*



*Figure 65 The Master Plan made for Shatan Village in 2004*

*Source: Author's construction based on the Shatan Village Master Plan designed by Donghua Plan and Architecture Design Ltd. Zhejiang*

To some extent, the spatial changes from before and after the SNV construction reflect the shift of social relationships and production organizations. Before the SNV intervention, there were

two main streets that could be identified. One was located on the north side of the river, connecting to areas outside the village. This street, together with the old bridge beside it, was a space for villagers to organize an outdoor bazaar every ten days. It was a traditional local activity for exchanging agricultural products and was one of the important functions of an administrative village. The other main street ran inside the old village, connected to the Taiwei Temple, a cultural and spiritual landmark for the villagers. On this street was the organization of collective properties that hosted significant public services, such as grain supply center, local clinic and village office among others.

Public spaces in the village were not easy to find, harder to identify from a map. Only the spatial structure of the temple was clear. Residential houses were easy to distinguish. They were not always constructed along straight lines but were diverse in orientation and scale. Small plots of farmlands, self-reserved land, were either between or behind the rural houses. They were mainly used for growing everyday foods like vegetables and raising fowl like chickens and ducks to support villagers' daily needs. The rest of the spaces around the village, as in small plots of farmland without consistent orientation, size, or organization, were randomly arranged according to the various ownerships. This spatial layout, stemming from the two main streets, indicated a very close relationship between the villagers and their land, and the core of their everyday lives. The farmlands of varying sizes also indirectly reflected the numbers of family members of different rural households.

Their relationship with the land, however, changed as less and less members of the local population subsisted on agriculture. The rural spaces in Shatan and what they represented shifted over time. Houses became more crucial for their social value rather than their use, which turned out to be a nationwide phenomenon. Each family required more living spaces, so their big houses could be appreciated by relatives and neighbors. This was crucial in rural marriage. Newly constructed rural houses were, therefore, large in scale, exceeding the actual need, resulting in emptiness.

The new village construction promoted by the SNV, moreover, led to a thorough transformation of previous relationship between the people and land of Shatan. The village master plan made in 2004 by an authorized plan and design institute directed new constructions starting in 2005. Unfortunately, the plan held neither enthusiasm nor respect for rural livelihoods and the local context. It ignorantly and arrogantly introduced, if not copied, irrelevant forms of living and urban landscapes. Regardless, new rural apartments were built on the eastern side of the village

according to the plan and lined up along new village roads as wide as the main roads that supported external traffic, if not wider, with few constructed on the western side.

These new residential buildings were directed by new official construction guidelines, drafted to meet the increasing need for more living spaces and regulate rural residential buildings, but these guidelines included little information regarding local construction skills and customs, leading to inconveniences, such as little natural lighting in the ground floor houses, so complained by a local senior carpenter. In addition, many new buildings constructed lacked any trace of local culture. Instead, they were built in strange, foreign styles, like those using “fake roman columns.” This conflict could not simply be attributed to villagers’ supposedly bad tastes in aesthetics. It should, instead, be interpreted as the residents’ desperate desire to eliminate the poverty-related elements in their lives, whether defined by themselves or the urban dwellers, and become modern. In the same sense, villagers prefer to decorate the facade of their houses in fancy styles, rather than paint the interior, if they had a limited budget for construction.

Not surprisingly, the SNV plan was slowly implemented, due to the difficulty in negotiating land adjustments among villagers who individually possessed the plots of collective land. According to villagers living in the new areas of the village, they had to agree to move to certain places in the new village, while discussing the lease of their land to the village collective. As a result, they no longer possessed any land for planting, not even self-reserved plots. “I have no backup plan without the farmland,” said a middle-aged villager anxiously, “I could only find work elsewhere in the urban area and I felt insecure.”

Fortunately, the planned demolition and construction stopped for new rural development objectives and the local and central authorities proposed the BVC policy. Some old parts of the village could be preserved, rather than destroyed entirely as had been planned in the SNV. The practice specified by the BVC policy directed Shatan’s development following 2012. Planning professionals from Tongji University invited by the district government agriculture officer then led the transformation of Shatan. The major planning interventions shifted towards collectively-owned properties and public places. Their practice followed little in the way of normative urban planning and refused the former rural development paradigms.

By the time of the field investigation of present research, the western part of Shatan had been mostly preserved, rather than reconstructed. The trajectory of the village’s development was evident in the housing constructions displayed along the street connecting west and east, the old

to the new [Figure 66]. The earliest rural houses dated before the 1970s still exist and lived in. They were wooden houses characterized by double roofs and backyards, whereas buildings dating back to the 1980s supported brickwork structures with small yards in the front and verandas on the first floor. Residential buildings constructed after 2000 were nothing similar to rural houses in any traditional and common sense anymore. They were more like village apartments without yards [Figure 67], restrained by intensive land use standards.



*Figure 66 The residential houses along the village street - constructed before the 1970s, around the 1980s, and after 2005*

*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*



*Figure 67 A glance at the new village constructed since around 2005*

*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

### **6.2.3 Major Challenges and Restrains**

Shatan, a village deep in the mountains but not far from the urban center of Huangyan, faces major challenges regarding the increasing enhancement of development requirements on socioeconomic transformation, the unbalanced demographic structure, diversified local needs and visions of the future, and a blurred local identity. The restrains on tangible and intangible resources and relevant development policy are also critical.

#### **■ Socioeconomic Transformation**

Shatan village experienced major rural development phases, as in the agriculture development, rural industrialization on collective land through family workshops and scaled factories, the SNV construction and the most recently BVC policy. All these transformations shared an aim to meet the new requirements of rural economic development and changes in social structure, as in an aging society, women outnumbering men and children left behind. However, the extensive use of land and low-end rural industrialization is no longer an option for rural economic development in China. Rural industry is not encouraged, if not altogether forbidden, for various reasons, principally that is against the law of land. Unfortunately, the existing rural economy in Shatan, mainly comprised of rural factories and a few agricultural productions, does not provide enough financial support nor suitable job opportunities for rural residents' livelihoods. Neither is it sustainable concerning globalization and natural environment. Thus more and more villagers are leaving to work in urban areas. Women, children and the elderly are the main residents of Shatan.

#### **■ Diversified Local Needs and Visions of the Future**

Though small in scale, the expectations of its development are not limited to needs of the local villagers and the village representatives. They are also affected considerably by the township governors, the district agriculture officers and so on. In interviews and participatory observations, the current expectations for the implementation of BVC were found to be diverse, rather than identical. District governors focused on how to maximize the benefit of the policy and public investments. They expected a new dynamic in rural development could encourage the revitalization of the whole region, rather than just several villages benefiting. The agenda of the township government narrowed down the best interests of the villages in their prefecture, while village representatives focused on negotiating and competing for the best conditions for themselves and the villagers, though mainly for themselves. Villagers with less information were interested in personal benefits. At the same time, professionals expected positive feedback from

the practice of their theories and concepts in rural development. All of these diverse visions and aims were expected to be realized in the experimental practice in Shatan.

Rather than trying to emphasize the variety in priorities and expectations between different stakeholders, the aim of listing these differences is to clarify the inevitable challenges in synthesizing them in real practice. The difference in interests must be balanced, negotiations need to be conducted and priorities have to be set in order. This way, different actors can be enlisted, given limited resources and public investments.

#### ■ Local Identity

Prior development in Shatan resulted in negative physical transformations, particularly in the homogeneous rural apartments lined up along village streets during the implementation of the SNV. It destroyed the local features, public recognition, and the original heterogeneity of the culture, history and space. Only the Taiwei Temple and the old street on the western side of the village were retained. The sense of identity exhibited in the built environment has almost faded. The villagers' strong drive for, or pursue of, "modernity" also affected the village's local identity. Some of the new buildings exaggerated their designs, or applied modern elements, such as colorful windows, which were mostly green, and strange roman columns, which were inconsistent. To redefine the local identity was a challenge. Identifying traits from history, culture, the natural and human environments, common local recognition, and even visions of future, and emphasizing them in the physical environment, social events and everyday life through acceptable approaches in appropriate forms was both essential and hard. It even seemed more difficult to conceive a way to make residents recognize and feel proud once more of these identified values originating from their own legacies.

In addition to these challenges, there were some severe restrains on development as well, including limited external connections and human resources, policy requirements, and the natural environment.

#### ■ Limited External Connections and Human Resources

Compared to external development, Shatan is less connected and thus, of course, indirectly affected. Its local transformation would hardly rely on forces of external motion or development opportunities from adjacent regions. The limited opportunities for development have also resulted in an increasingly severe lack of human resources.

## ■ Policy Requirements

These requirements are another critical influence restraining and limiting village development. While the rural land policy prohibited the use of local construction land for developing industry and free trade in the land market, the regional master plan further limited resource utilization of all kinds.

## ■ Natural Environment Restrains

The rolling hills surrounding the area first determined the inconvenience of transportation and the huge costs for road construction in the region. The Changtan Reservoir also limited the formation of these roads. Thus, the accessibility of Shatan Village, a significant factor affecting its rural revitalization in general, was hard to improve. Clean energy applications, such as wind power generation and solar farms, were either hard to implement or were too costly due to the region's natural topography and geomorphy.

## **6.3 The “Beautiful Villages Construction” in Shatan**

### **6.3.1 The Initial Opportunity and the Original Vision**

Many local government officers and implementers responsible for the BVC felt stuck when it was first promoted, seeking help in every possible way, even in the form of academic support. The head of Agricultural Department of Huangyan District, in charge of drafting the plan to implement the BVC in rural areas and distributing the specialized funding and the construction land-quota from top to bottom, felt helpless. At first, he tried to distribute the funding according to the scale of each village in the district prefecture. However, equal allocation based on existed hierarchy made little progress for village transformations. He had no clue why the investments failed back then, so he invited a senior professor from the College of Architecture and Urban Planning (CAUP) at Tongji University to help him. The professor's work had started in several experimental projects in villages of west Huangyan.

According to the professor, current rural problems were severe, including waste in the use of land and construction, over-consumption of natural resources, and insufficient public services and infrastructure among others. These problems further emphasized the conflict between rural development and environmental protection. Also, the social and cultural problems reflected in residential and spatial structures were becoming of great importance, yet improving the built environment in these regions was far from enough to lessen the current dilemma. Comprehensive approaches capable of realizing the “self-hematopoietic function” of rural China

and stimulating “bottom-up,” “internal-external” initiatives were urgent. Along this line of thinking, the spatial interventions conducted in rural Huangyan were guided by a fundamental theory of urban-rural interaction. The main strategy was to integrate the development of the local industrial economy, social culture and spatial environment. The primary principle as stated was “proper environment, proper technology and proper habitat” (G. Yang, Dai, and Zhong 2005).

Shatan was the first of several villages directed by this new theory through some experimental approaches. It was one of the villages listed in the regional BVC program and was recommended to the professor by the district agriculture officer back in 2012, and was thus chosen as one of the candidates at the initial phase of the practice conducted by the professor, chosen because its ordinary location and resources as compared with other villages in the same area on the BVC list. In the end, after some pilot projects, Shatan was selected by both the local authority and the professor to proceed with the exploratory practice, as the stakeholders had shown better cooperative action and firmer determination. Other villages had dropped out of the practice, mostly due to some villagers constructing new apartments against the plan. These villages had only joined the program to gain a larger land-quota for rural construction from the BVC and increase the number of new village apartments. The professor’s team therefore shifted all attention to the practice in Shatan, aiming for rural revitalization.

### **6.3.2 Spatial Intervention Approaches**

The professor’s working principles emphasized that new projects planned and implemented should avoid adjusting the local collective land for construction as much as possible, except in the land-quota provided by the BVC policy. Thus, engaged with university efforts, the spatial intervention in Shatan focused on the western side, where collective properties were assembled and more local, cultural and public elements were better retained. The professional team first identified vacant and unwanted collectively-owned buildings, among which an old veterinary station was chosen and transformed into a multi-functional building as a pilot project.

The veterinary station was close to the entrance of the Taiwei Temple, alongside the road for external traffic. It was a spatial turning point between the old Shatan and the new village, such that, people, both residents and travelers alike, frequently passed in front of it. The initial idea was to retain the building’s structure and façade, and to adjust the interior. Local authorities and village representatives were invited to participate in the process of conceiving a transformation plan. Local artisans also contributed their intelligence and skills to its implementation. The

market, or rather the investors, was not involved in these phases of the plan. The plan was to utilize the building for public service first, then a proper renter could take it over for better use.



*Figure 68 A planning exhibition held in the transformed veterinary station and a discussion between villagers and professionals took place in its backyard*

*Source: Huangyan Exploration-Planning and Construction for Beautiful Countryside (G. Yang, Dai, and Zhong 2005)*

The completed project was confirmed by the local authorities and surprised the village representatives in a positive way. It was first used as a planning and exhibition space to encourage public participation and mutual communications, and at the same time, acted as a temporary design hub for the university team members. The vision for Shatan's future spaces was exhibited in panels and models. Residents were welcomed inside to discuss the plan with the team members and local authorities [Figure 68]. It tried to open a channel for local communities to know more about the projects to be implemented, as well as acquire their feedback in return.

Through this experimental project, an innovative planning procedure for the plan and implementation of rural transformation was formed. Rather than following the norm of starting from short period fieldwork and ending up with official design documents, this pilot project challenged the conventional approaches and avoided its shortcomings. The professional team first spent a long period of time, over a month, in the field, investigating the status quo, drafting plans and discussing them with relevant actors. Then the professor supervised the whole process as the project was implemented, discussing sketches of problems encountered with local craftsmen through an online social media platform. Thereafter, adjustments were constantly made to the plan, according to local skill, the realities of implementation and input from the villagers.

### 6.3.3 Completed Projects and Mechanisms of Operation

Since the pilot project was well-accepted and being an administrative village, thus having many vacant collectively-owned buildings once used for public services, there were many projects thereafter planned and implemented, supported by the BVC, applying the new methods.

From here, the completed projects [Figure 69], directed by the university professor, will be introduced in approximate chronological order.



Figure 69 The university-led projects and other initiatives stimulated by them

Source: Author's construction based on Baidu Map

#### ■ Discarded Veterinary Station

Originally a vacant and unwanted house on the north side of the main road between Shatan and other areas, this two-storey building was supported by a wood and brick structure, characterized by a traditional Chinese double-pitch tiled roof and a Chinese balcony on the first floor. The walls were made with bricks, while the windows and doors were made of wood. The front and back yards were big and simple with long stone cribs set inside for keeping and feeding sick fowls. The original idea was to maintain the original features and layout, including the cribs, the hundred-year-old plants in the yards and the yards themselves. Light steel was used to enhance the old architecture, thereby creating no visible disturbance to its façade. Building materials were selected with respect to the time of the building's initial construction. The ground floor windows and doors were replaced with transparent glass to allow for more natural

lighting and framed [Figure 70]. The yards were cleared and altered into multi-functional, semi-public spaces, and the cribs were repurposed into flowerbeds.



Figure 70 The veterinary station: before and after its transformation  
Source: Huangyan Exploration-Planning and Construction for Beautiful Countryside (G. Yang, Dai, and Zhong 2005)

After its reconstruction, this building was first used as plan and exhibition space for locals to receive notice on the on-going BVC practice and to extend the involvement of relevant actors. Not long after, as expected, some local residents were interested in the previously unwanted space and rented it to run an e-commercial store, selling and showcasing some local agriculture products [Figure 71]. Since the design of the interior was quite flexible, there was very little trouble or need for much adjustment to make it suitable for other requirements.



Figure 71 An e-commercial store selling agriculture products started in the previous veterinary station  
Source: Author's own photograph (2015)

### ■ New Public Toilet

Not long after the professional team's fieldwork, a new public toilet was constructed [Figure 72], as they had found this to be a real need in the village's infrastructure. It was considered a significant project for residents' daily needs and a likely requirement from tourists. Prior to its construction, residents living on the western side of Shatan had to use outdoor pit-holes, which were smelly and inconvenient. Tourists, who could number in the thousands on certain days, even if they visited mainly for the Taiwei Temple, would also experience this inconvenience.

An old field close to Taiwei Temple and the eastern end of the old street on the western side of the village was chosen for its construction. The style of the building was designed with respect to local construction elements. To blend in with the old village, it was designed as a one-and-a-half storey building with a double-pitch roof covered with dark tiles. The higher part of the roof was left open and used for ventilation and to allow the filtration of natural light. Although a modern material as light steel was applied to support the whole structure, stones, the most representative of local construction, were stacked to define the new place, while brick walls divided the interior. After its completion, local residents frequently used it and in interviews, expressed satisfaction with this new and important improvement.



*Figure 72 The new toilet*

*Source: CAI Yan's photograph (2016)*

### ■ New Community Drama Stage and Square

The local drama show was a traditional custom with a long history. It meant a lot to the residents of the village, as well as neighboring regions. Villagers invited the drama troupe to organize a performance annually, but the show was performed on a temporary stage constructed in front of the temple, and if the weather condition was bad, the condition of the stage was rough. Village representatives, local authorities and the professional team, thus, decided to build a new community stage and square to fulfill local needs.



*Figure 73 The space comparison before and after the construction of the new community drama stage and square*

*Source: Huangyan Exploration-Planning and Construction for Beautiful Countryside (G. Yang, Dai, and Zhong 2005) and author's photograph (2016)*

A vacant spot in front of the Taiwei Temple, used previously for the temporary stage, was chosen to build the new stage and square [Figure 73]. However, residents strongly opposed the detailed plan for the stage proposed by the professionals. They insisted the stage should not face east, which would damage the local feng shui seen to protect the region for generations. Negotiations were not working. Another plan was therefore proposed by the village leader. Unfortunately, this plan was also rejected by both local authorities and the professional team. Given the deadlock, the final decision was left to the god of the temple that the residents believed in. Unexpectedly, the local god ruled in favor of the plan proposed by the professional team, thereby allowing the project to proceed.

The newly introduced space was constructed with features of the local aesthetic and became the fixed location for the annual drama performance. It also became a multi-functional space creatively used by the residents. Before, villagers would meet up by the gate of the temple [Figure 74], but with the construction of the community stage and square, they could meet in the long corridors of the square. It became a favored place for villagers to get together, chat, smoke and square dance, regardless whether it was sunny or raining. Sometimes, the place was even used for producing local foods, such as tofu [Figure 75]. The square became a distinct spot,

supporting and encouraging local's social life, whereas before, these kinds of social activities could only have been observed in the front and back yards of villagers' houses, or in and around the temple.



*Figure 74 Villagers' daily communication spot at the entrance of Taiwei Temple*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*



*Figure 75 Villagers were making local food – tofu – in the corridor on the newly constructed square*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

### ■ Eco-friendly Parking Lot

A parking lot built in an eco-friendly manner was constructed, allowing rain to percolate underground as much as possible [Figure 76]. It was situated east of the Taiwei Temple and the renovated veterinary station, alongside the main road for external traffic. The primary purpose of this project was to solve the shortage of parking spaces for visitors to the temple and possibly for future developments in tourism. It also provided space for the villagers living in the old village who had no place for their cars.



*Figure 76 The eco-friendly parking lot*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

### ■ The Tai-chi Lake Park

The idea for this lake park came from an already existing pond and the water drainage system beside it. The land was formed in an expansion of the pond, but surrounding plants were preserved and organized [Figure 77]. Newly planted willows and lotuses accented the landscape as in classical Chinese gardens. The form of the water and the design of the plants was to culturally echo the local religion, derived from Taoism, which profoundly affected the villagers. The original drainage system of the village flowed into the lake, allowing water collected from the gutters to be roughly and naturally cleaned.



*Figure 77 The Tai-chi Lake*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

#### ■ Seasonal Orchard

To reorganize some geographically assembled collective farmlands, a seasonal orchard was designed [Figure 78] with the aim of retaining the practice of farming, while increasing the value-added in agricultural production. The first choice was participatory leisure farming, rather than large-scale modernized agriculture, which was not a proper alternative for mountainous villages. Fruits, such as peaches and pears, which were suitable for the conditions in Shatan, were planted in the orchard, whereas a cycling trail and bodies of water were added to enrich the outdoor activities.

The procedure for this project is similar to those aforementioned. The professional team conceived a plan and supervised the implementation. Local artisans worked on the orchard, while local authorities negotiated and signed the leasing contracts on the land with the villagers that owned them. When the project was close to finishing up, the township authorities advertised it in the market, looking for proper renters.



*Figure 78 The seasonal orchard was under construction*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

■ Observation Deck beside the Rouji Brook

The Rouji Brook affected the original formation of the villages on either side of its banks. It comes from the surrounding mountains, running through Shatan from the northwest to the southeast. The water level changes with the season, causing shifts in the landscape. In the rainy season, when the water level rises, the stream rushes down and covers the stone steps connecting its banks, whereas in the dry season, when the water level falls, the stream has a gentle flow, exposing the beautiful stones lying in the riverbed. A new observation deck was therefore planned and positioned next to a bend in the brook. It was built in the form of a traditional Chinese corridor with Chinese garden seats, also known as “beauty seats,” set inside [Figure 79]. This observation deck serves as a nice spot from which to view the brook, but also offers villages a place to spend their leisure time to enjoy the cool wind by the brook in the summer, when the weather is warmer.



*Figure 79 The observation deck next to the Rouji Brook*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

### ■ Former Village Clinic

Shatan used to have a public clinic serving its residents, as well as those from neighboring villages. However, with rural development strategies in proceeding decades, public services were integrated into the larger towns, leaving the clinic buildings abandoned and unused. Located between Taiwei Temple and the old village, the former clinic building was a comparatively large two-storey structure that should not have existed as negative space. Thus, a re-construction project was planned with the aim of retaining the spatial structure as much as possible, while introducing the new functions needed. In this sense, the basic structure and spatial features were preserved [Figure 80]. The wooden-structured double-pitch roof was restored with several small scuttles to allow for more natural light. The front yard was cleaned up and paved with dark bricks, enhancing the local features, while also allowing rainwater to flow underground as much as possible.



*Figure 80 The previous village clinic: before and after the transformation*

*Source: Author's photograph (2015/2016)*

For the arrangement of the interior, on the ground floor were both formal and informal meeting spaces, multi-functional rooms, individual offices, a design studio, small exhibition, kitchen and an indoor toilet. There were even three apartments and a small library with an area for discussion arranged on the first floor. At present, this building is being used as the design hub for professional team and students from Tongji University, where they can live and work during their field investigations. The Tongji Association for Rural Revitalization was officially established in Huangyan in 2018 and setup its office in this building, which also hosts meetings

and reception with local authorities when not occupied. As with previous projects, the interior can be easily adjusted to accommodate the needs of future renters.

#### ■ Village Bar

At the west end of the old village was a small, one-storey shack. The interior was triangular, making it hard to use. Before the university's interventions, the plan was to tear it down, but the professor leading the professional team believed the space had possibilities, so the shack was spared. The local authorities and village leaders then traveled to Shanghai, visiting some of the old communities to learn about their experiences with old community revitalization, and became interested in having a bar in Shatan. With the help of planning and design professionals, they turned the little house into an exotic village bar in 2016 [Figure 81]. A bartender was invited to the village and mint was planted. The younger generation in the neighborhood seemed excited about this new place.



*Figure 81 A village wine bar transformed from a small shack*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

#### ■ Rural Inn

Before, tourists visiting Shatan had to cross the Rouji Brook to find a rural hotel or accommodations to stay overnight as there were none in the village, and on the other side of the Rouji Brook, the water resource was better. It was imperative then, to the local authorities, to consider a rural inn for future development in tourism. Thus, a three-storey house next to the new village bar was rented and renovated to be a rural inn. The structure was retained and the façade's design was matched to the adjacent houses, most of which were built in the late 1970s and the 1980s [Figure 82]. The new functions needed to run a rural hotel were arranged according to the original interior with a kitchen and living room on ground floor and the four

accommodated guestrooms located on ground, the first and second floors. In 2016, the rural inn was opened by the township government on a trial basis.



*Figure 82 The rural inn transformed from an ordinary rural house constructed around the 1980s  
Source: Author's own photograph and Zhen WANG (2016)*

#### ■ Old Grain and Oil Cooperative

The building for the old grain and oil-supply market cooperative, a uniquely spatial and social production from the previous planned economic era, was located beside the village clinic. It used to play a critical role in residents' everyday lives until it was abandoned and left empty, becoming an unpleasant public space since the cooperative finished its "historical mission." It was thus chosen for reconstruction into a high-end rural inn, provided its space and possible development requirements in the future. The design emphasized the interior through functional transformations, rather than modernizing the exterior. Five bedrooms inside were designed to reflect the five major grains in China, so that its historical and cultural meaning could be retained and remembered. Unique to this project, affordable construction techniques from Germany were introduced for the heating and insulation. These techniques, aimed at saving energy, solved the problem with heating and cooling in during midwinter and midsummer in the mountains. As of 2018, this project was still under construction and had yet to commence operations [Figure 83].



Figure 83 The reconstruction process of the previous grain and oil supply-marketing cooperative  
 Source: Author's photograph (2016) and Zheng W. (2018)

#### 6.4 Reflection of the “Beautiful Villages Construction” through Vignettes

The experimental practice in Shatan Village, supported and financed by the BVC, introduced many projects as listed in the previous section (6.3). Here, through vivid depictions of scenes experienced in this village, this section aims to uncover 1) the socio-cultural status quo these projects embedded and the villagers' attitudes towards them, 2) how the implementation procedures of these projects could reflect different actors' relationships and bargaining chips, and 3) the conditions of use and operational mechanisms of these new places.

Over fifty vignettes reflecting the above-listed foci in Shatan were recorded, from which the nine most representative were chosen [Figure 84] and categorized into three groups. An analytical discussion follows each group accordingly. The first group consists of three vignettes, revealing social relationships and the various attitudes of villagers of various ages and genders towards the planning interventions and public affairs. The first depicts a village couple, the first visitors to spontaneously visit the design hub. Though residents had been expected to visit, usually it was the professionals who approached them for interviews. The second depicts an interview conducted inside one of the village's rural houses, showing the villagers' everyday life and habits, as well as an ordinary village participant's attitude towards the ongoing changes. The third depicts a group discussion in the front yard of another rural house. The next four vignettes constituted the second group, which relays participatory discussions and negotiations between crucial actors, the engagement of the villagers, and in what way the experiences in Shatan were scaled up to a new paradigm affecting much broader regions. These vignettes primarily show the working approaches from the university, revealing that problems in rural transformations do not always come from the professional side. The last two remaining vignettes constitute the third

group, featuring the villagers' and visitors' daily activities in the newly introduced places and their attitudes towards them.



Figure 84 An overview of selected vignettes of Shatan Village

Source: Author's construction based on Baidu map

#### 6.4.1 Practices Embedded in the Local Context

##### Vignette 1: First Village-Couple Visiting the Design Hub in Shatan

In August 2015, the professor responsible for the BVC practice in Shatan Village and his teaching assistants led some graduate students majoring in urban planning from Tongji University to set up their work at the design hub in Shatan. Instead of settling down into the veterinary station as they had the first time, they moved to a glasshouse on the eastern end of the new community square. The space in the glasshouse was bigger and working conditions improved a lot. However, the heat trapped inside was unexpectedly unbearable after ten in the morning, when the huge transparent glass walls allowed too much natural light. After eleven in the morning, the midsummer heat usually rises higher than forty degrees Celsius. Thus, while the planners and students worked, the doors and windows were always kept open wide to increase ventilation.

One day, at twenty to six in the evening, with cicadas calling out loudly in the trees because of the ongoing heat, the students responsible for various kinds of fieldwork returned to the hub one after the other. They either rested against the table or casually chatted about their fieldwork near the doors. An elderly couple approached the design hub and were spotted immediately through the glass walls. At first, the students inside did not pay much attention as village leaders, delegations from other provinces and township authorities among others visited frequently.

Drawing even closer, the pair approached the front door and started asking questions of one another in their local dialect. Of the pair, the old man seemed very interested in seeing so many new faces, while the old lady hesitated, standing about a meter behind him. Soon, she started to urge the man to leave and go elsewhere. Then, one of the students close to the door stepped out and politely introduced herself, explaining the reasons for them working in the hub. She asked if they would like to come in and chat with the students. Both hesitated at first, but the man who was still very interested went in, followed shyly by the old woman.



*Figure 85 The first village-couple visiting the design hub in Shatan*

*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

This was the first time that any villagers had taken the initiative to visit the design hub in the glasshouse, though numerous others had visited before. The students were very excited and warmly offered their guests seats to sit on, water bottles and fresh fruits [Figure 85]. The old man sat down happily and started to chat with them, whereas the old woman, still feeling shy, felt more comfortable to stand near the doors. Throughout conversation, the old man introduced himself and his wife, saying that they were both teachers, which was why they could speak and understand Mandarin.

The students asked if he and his wife were aware of the new places around the village. The old man answered firmly, "Of course, our home is just in front of the square and beside the veterinary station." Then he paused and smiled, but did not raise any questions.

Continuing, another student asked if they like the new places. Delightedly, the old man replied, "The environment has improved greatly. The village is much cleaner than before. My wife and I really enjoy walking on the square and the old main street after dinner. We were walking through the square just now, when we noticed the glasshouse was open, so we came and wanted to have a look."

When asked if they had been invited by the village representatives or local authorities to join the discussions regarding the newly implemented projects, the man answered in the negative. He and his wife were not informed of the participatory planning, but they would have been delighted if they had been invited. Another student then asked what else he thought the village needed or what else could be introduced. A long silence followed. The questions shifted to collect whatever other answers the students needed. The old couple maintained courteous smiles, thereafter, without answering.

Sometime later, they started to show some interest in the students personally and their working schedules. In return, they were also willing to share about themselves. The old man said he had three sons, all of them working in Huangyan District, but he did not want to live to the urban center to live with them. Instead, the children came back every other week and on weekends that the sons could not go home, the old couple would visit them. Time flew by with old couple talking and laughing from time to time, such that the hot weather and time were left forgotten.

## Vignette 2: Visit to a Local Carpenter's House



*Figure 86 An interview with a local carpenter in his kitchen and the view outside of the kitchen  
Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

In August, the weather in Huangyan was so unbearable, even in the western mountainous areas. Temperatures of this level were estimated to last at least a month said the local residents. The fieldwork, thus, had to be divided between seven to eleven in the morning and three to six in the evening. As routine for their summer workshop, it mainly consisted of relevant information gathering and interviews of the villagers. The students and staff in the planning team were dressed in T-shirts designed by the professor with the words “Beautiful Village” printed on them, instead of other identifying logos or icons. This way, the villagers would not be suspicious for their work in the village, as rural China was an “Acquaintance Society,” where everyone knows one another in a community.

Close to five o'clock in the afternoon, the students were walking in pairs through different parts of the village. The roads of the new village running parallel to the transmeridional direction were bathed in white light, and the heat from the concrete pavements was unbearable. Without trees or traditional double-deck eaves, pedestrians could hardly keep their eyes open while walking through the eastern end of the village. The roads were so straight, wide and empty that one could easily see from one end to the other. Usually, at this time of day during this season, residents would start cooking. The smells of hot air and cooking mixed in the air as some villagers kept their doors open in the summer.

A pair of the students were walking through the northern side of the village, close to the factories. The street they walked along faced the back doors of the houses. A middle-aged villager who came out of his kitchen to fetch some firewood for cooking noticed them and warmly invited them into his house. He seemed aware of some of their works.

His two-storey house was constructed around or after 2005 in the fashion of a rural apartment. Stepping up and walking into his kitchen, the students noticed that the space inside was dark, despite the bright sunshine outside. From the kitchen to the corridor leading to the living room facing the south, the interior grew darker and darker. None of the rooms inside were decorated either. The cemented walls and floors were unpolished. Not a single piece of decent furniture stood in the kitchen, so all the containers and cooking tools were stacked up [Figure 86].

The students noticed the villager was still cooking with firewood, such that one of them could not help asking, "You still use firewood for cooking? We were told that gas was available to all the villagers now, isn't that right?"

"Yes," he replied as he invited the students to sit on some low wooden stools, "but we are surrounded by mountains. It is much cheaper to fetch wood in the forests for cooking. Firewood is a natural gift." They were lucky that the man could speak Mandarin and had no problem communicating with them. Without much introduction, their conversation continued. One of the students asked if he knew about the ongoing projects around the village. The man answered with short and determined words, "Of course I know. I also worked on some of them." Then he proudly elaborated, "I was a worker and worked in many cities in China, but as I am getting older, I decided to come back to my hometown and find a job here." The students were surprised to find out that he was sixty-seven years old, despite how strong, healthy and independent he seemed. The man continued, "I am a carpenter too, so it is easier for me to get a job here as many villagers in Shatan no longer possess any collective farmland, except for homesteads." Homestead, known as *Zhaijidi*, are a particular kind of collective land distributed to villagers for constructing their own houses, of which the land to use and its size were strictly regulated. The carpenter was fortunate as his family members, mainly his wife and two sons, were able to support their livelihoods by getting local jobs in the village. This old father could not help disguising his pride when he told the students that one of his sons was a carpenter specialized in wood-carving and had been involved in the transformation work promoted by the BVC.

He himself and his son having worked on the projects, it seemed he knew more about them, so the students asked him for his opinion about them. He smiled and affirmed that the village environment had improved a lot. More space was clear out for villagers to spend their leisure time. He was happy about the changes. One of the students then ventured to ask if he had been invited to discuss the projects before their implementation, but the answer was no. However, when asked if he would like to be involved in future discussions regarding the spatial interventions in Shatan, his response was positive. He exhibited a strong willingness to be involved in the practice. Then the other student asked, finally, if he had any suggestions for Shatan's future development. The old man stopped and took a long while to think, yet in the end had no answer to offer.

As the students said goodbye, the carpenter suddenly became a bit shy, asking if he could have a T-shirt like one the students and staff were wearing. The students promised they would ask someone in charge. He wondered to them how long they would be staying in the village. They answered that they would stay for about two weeks. At last, they shook hands and the students departed.

### **Vignette 3: Chatting in the Neighborhood Close to the Design Hub**



*Figure 87 Chatting in villagers' front yard*

*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

It was the fifth day since the professional team had settled in Shatan. The weather was so hot every day. Even with the occasional thunderstorms in the evenings, the days could hardly cool down. For the students whose first time this was, this situation was highly unexpected. It also affected the schedules for fieldwork, since it was hard to find interviewees in the heat. Aside from the weather, communications and interviews were still difficult as Mandarin was not frequently used by the residents, probably due in part to the aging population. Many students looked forward to having a "translator." In fact, at the beginning, the township governors offered to support the students' fieldwork. They recommended some of their staff to help with translation, but the proposal was turned down by both the professor and the students who thought that the staffs from the local authorities might unnecessarily guide interviewees' answers. They also did not want their fieldwork to be mistaken for government action, which could sabotage the research. Thus, their kindness had to be kindly refused.

So on the fifth day since the professional team had settled in Shatan, a student who had grown up in Huangyan majoring in landscape architecture in Chongqing learned of the fieldwork and interested in the practice, came to the village, volunteering to join the field investigation. She had no problem in conversing with the villagers, despite coming from the urban area. Arriving in the morning, her arrival encouraged the students and they welcomed her warmly. In fact, the appearance of this new member greatly reversed the low enthusiasm resulting from the slow progress of the investigation. The whole team was invigorated.

Before the weather got too hot, the "translator" soon prepared herself and was taken out with the students to conduct interviews. They hit the road full of expectation. Soon, they found a bunch of villagers gathered together in the front of a row of houses close to the hub. The houses were located on the west side of the new village near the community square and Tai-chi Lake. There were wet grains on the floor with villagers sitting around in random spots. The students confidently decided to join the conversation with the help of their newest addition [Figure 87]. They awkwardly introduced themselves and their working objectives, unfamiliar with how to conduct a group interview and unable to decide who to face while speaking. Reluctantly, the villagers accepted the students in their conversation.

It turned out they were all just neighbors, rather than relatives, and all of them were advanced in age. There was an eighty-four years old female farmer sitting in the front, while a man over eighty leaned against a sink beside her. Another man, more than sixty years old, stood in the middle, casually flattening grains on the ground. Another two women chatted behind him.

Shortly after the students' introduction, a younger of the two men took lead of the conversation. The rest either backed him up or provided additional information from time to time. However, the eldest woman sitting in front showed no interest at all, staring far away during the conversation. Gradually, the man opened up and complained a lot about the township authority, but the older man who seemed to care about what the students thought tried to shift his focus back to their questions. The students emphasized that they were not investigating for the local authorities and the outcomes of their investigation would not be submitted to the administration. Their fieldwork was only to be used for academic research and adjustment of the ongoing practice in Shatan.

The younger of the two men who seemed to represent the rest finally took the students' questions seriously. He said they all noticed the huge improvement in the built environment of the village, adding that he frequented the new public places. Soon, he started to talk about his family. His thirty-year old son was working in urban Huangyan, though working outside was not that good given the high instability. Helplessly, he said, "We all sold our farmland to our village collective, so we do not have any land to farm now."

At the same time, the elder of the two men started to murmur quickly in their dialect, expressing some strong feelings. Unfortunately, the meaning of the words could not be deciphered by the group's "translator," but his stern expression was obvious. Then, the other man continued, "In the past, when we went out for jobs and could not find any, we just came back to our village. Farming was always a choice. However, now it is not an option anymore. We are only left with empty houses, and I feel lost. "

The students then asked about their attitudes regarding the new projects, wondering whether they felt positive about the future development of rural tourism and if they saw themselves participating in the development. The younger of the two men seemed to have a lot of thoughts on the subject until he interrupted by himself and said that he had no doubts that the development of tourism would help the village and provide more job opportunities, but he thought it was insufficient. Particularly for the residents who had already moved to the new village, the chances for them becoming involved in the development was even less. He said, "I think at most seven to ten percent of locals could benefit from the development of tourism if the strategy is successful. "

The students had no idea where such specific numbers came from, so they confirmed it with the farmer who seemed very determined. The students continued, asking whether he was invited to the discussions concerning implementation of the projects, since it seemed he had given a lot of thought to the village's development. The man answered with a meaningful smile and said how could that ever happen. Nonetheless, he added, "I would be more than happy to join this kind of meeting, though I feel it is highly impossible." More importantly, he felt the top-down intervention was a bit too much for Shatan, provided its status as an administrative village, where the township office was located. He argued that apart from the physical construction, many other aspects, such as rural social insurance, also needed more focus. As soon as the rural social insurance was mentioned, the rest began agitated and expressed strong feelings. They started a fierce discussion of the issue, comparing the situation in Shatan to other villages. They thought that rural social insurance should have been imperative.

"I know many villagers in the other villages who already have the rural social insurance. I do not know why we do not have it yet."

The discussion was so intense among the villagers that the students listened a while before saying thank you and goodbye, and leaving.

## **Discussion**

The three preceding vignettes reflected the locals' socio-culture status quo and conveyed villagers' opinions regarding the BVC practice through depictions of the houses and environment in which they lived, as well as residents' daily behavior and the conversations with them. Several crucial details are worth noting from the observations.

- (1) Agriculture was still important to the villagers' lives, at least for spiritual spirit, if not for their livelihoods. It still affected their way of using spaces.
- (2) Locals maintained some traditional living habits, such as cooking with firewood and washing in the river among others. These habits resulted from long-time customs and limited incomes.
- (3) A certain amount of villagers who once worked in the urban area still wanted the option of going back to farming. They would like to return to the village to work and live when the work outside is not ideal, or when they are old.
- (4) Contrasting the building façades, the interiors of new village apartments were rustic and undecorated. The new village apartments, mostly constructed after 2005, were decorated in a tiled style popular in urban areas in the 1990s, despite lacking decoration and light inside.

- (5) Villagers, more or less, expressed insecurity and emptiness after leasing, or selling, previously owned farmland to the village collective.
- (6) Villagers were positive towards the improvements to the built environment and most of them frequented the new public places.
- (7) Villagers accepted rural tourism as a development strategy but it did not really attract their attention, since many of them felt left out of the new development trend. On the contrary, they were extremely interested in matters of more personal benefit, such as the rural social insurance, as mentioned most frequently by the villagers.
- (8) Though villagers showed a strong willingness to participate in local planning processes, they felt less confident and doubted the possibility of being involved. They did not believe their suggestions and comments would be taken seriously.

## **6.4.2 University Engagement and Its Impacts**

### **Vignette Four: Fieldwork**

#### **■ The Journey Started**

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 2015, a planning team comprised of a senior professor, a junior planner, two Ph.D. candidates, and seven graduate students majoring in urban planning were about to start the annual summer workshop in Shatan Village. Apart from the graduate students, they were already familiar with the site. Some of the graduate students were first-time visitors. The atmosphere was comfortable, even exciting for the new visitors, and all members were ready with maps, sketch markers, rulers and scroll holders among other necessary tools for fieldworks.

They took the high-speed Rail (HSR) leaving around eleven in the morning for Huangyan. Nearly three hours later, they arrived at the HSR station of Taizhou Municipality. A van arranged by the local authorities picked them up and after an hour's drive, brought them to a rural hotel in a village next to Shatan. The mountain road wandered much, such that it cost a great deal of time to travel and made people feel a bit dizzy. The plan had been to stay in Shatan, so that it would be more convenient to carry out daily fieldwork the next fifteen days. Unfortunately, though, two of the projects, a rural inn and the design hub, were still under construction.

#### **■ Working Routines**

Shortly after settling down in the rural hotel, a brief meeting was held in the dining room on the ground floor with members sitting around a dining table. At the meeting, the professor proposed a strict daily work schedule, starting from 7:30 in the morning and ending at 6:00 in the evening,

along with some ground rules. Specific work assignments were distributed mostly depending on individual plans as related to various research aspects and design foci. The only restriction was that fieldwork be conducted in pairs.

On the first day, however, the work in the afternoon was postponed for half an hour as local temperatures rose to over 40 degrees Celsius. Since conditions were likely to be similar throughout this period of time, the work schedule had to be adjusted accordingly. Dressed in the T-shirt designed by the professor with the logo, “Beautiful Countryside of Huangyan,” and the famous image of the Garden City, the team headed to the temporary working hub. The distance between the rural hotel and the hub was ten minutes walking, yet without much shade anywhere, the whole place was like a huge sauna. Such a hot summer in the mountains was really unexpected for the new visitors. Fortunately, the team soon arrived at the hub. They arranged the place in moments, hanging up recent sketches and connecting their computers. Then they left in pairs to start their fieldwork.

#### ■ **Field Directions**

The professor did not stay long in the hub either. Accompanied by township authorities, including the head, deputy-head and project manager among others, he headed to a vacant collective-owned property. As they walked over to the site, the head and deputy-head asked a lot of questions. They were worried with how the project had stagnated for a while without the professor’s direction. However, the professor consoled them as always, saying, “Let us figure it out at the spot.”

After several minutes of walking, they arrived at the site and entered the building under reconstruction. The construction team was already waiting. The building used to be a local clinic. The space inside was almost equally divided. The windows facing the hall where patients would get their waiting numbers were preserved as they were typical in size and form, such that people would easily think of the building’s original purpose.

The local authorities had three main concerns: spatial distribution, building structure and future functions. People at the site actively discussed these issues. The construction team was eager to learn the detailed plan for the roof. Local works were not sure how to embed a window without disturbing the original structure. They could not work it out, even with the sketches sent to them days ago, as there were unexpected problems in the implementation. The project manager explained that the brick structure of the old building limited what approaches could be used to

extend the space. Old wooden roofs covered with tiles increased the difficulty in opening up windows as in the design. “The old roof structure cannot hold the new windows,” said the project manager, “so we are afraid the roof cannot be preserved as planned.” He seemed very worried.

“The wooden structure is so fragile,” added one of the craftsmen, “as the house has been empty for years, and no maintenance work has ever been done.” The local artisans insisted the roof be torn down as it would cost a fortune to preserve the old roof, rather than simply replacing it with a new one.

The professor said nothing but started to carefully study every part comprising the roof, asking about their condition and whether they could be preserved or reused if the roof were to be reconstructed. With the local artisans, they discussed practical possibilities based on local construction skills and cost [Figure 88]. Soon, through the passionate discussion between the professor, a Ph.D. candidate once majoring in architecture and of course, the local craftsmen, a new plan without such obstacles was conceived, retaining the original design concept. They agreed to take down the whole roof at first and add windows as designed. The artisans would reuse the original parts as much as possible in constructing the new roof.



*Figure 88 A discussion on site regarding construction adjustments*

*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

Then the main question shifted from building structure to spatial distribution and future functions. They agreed on most of the plan. The only problem left was where to install the kitchen and how to shape the meeting rooms. The head and deputy-head already had many ideas for the building as they had gone out and visited many projects in various other villages that enjoyed some prestige, thus they took the lead in this discussion. The man in charge of the

construction team added comments or suggestions occasionally. Meanwhile, the professor was in no hurry to join in. Instead, he carefully listened to their requests and visions of the future. When they had finished, he started to mediate their thoughts according to different aspects and finally, they agreed to introduce a larger meeting space on the ground floor. The local craftsmen then estimated the structure's current state, given their experiences, and soon determined that the adjustment would be within the building's carrying capacity.

### ■ Typical Problems Regarding Culture

Days of intense fieldwork were not enough. The group, consisting of the professionals, local authorities, district agricultural officer, local craftsmen, and so on, constantly showed up in different spots around the village. There was a day that they were so busy, they had not stopped for even a sip of water the whole morning. After visiting several ongoing projects, they arrived in a small but traditional backyard. It was located in the middle of the old village on the southern side of the old street. The backyard was very cozy and cool, enclosed by stonewalls covered with lichen. As they stopped in, the head immediately introduced it, saying "we have already rented this place, and we intend to open a teahouse here, but unfortunately one of the old trees in the yard has died recently and now only one is left in the middle." No one noticed any problems yet. The professor just responded that it was a pity and asked the reason for the old tree's sudden death.

The head stated, "It was a natural death, but," and he paused a while, trying to say something and hesitating, "There is only one tree left in the middle of the yard now." He sounded anxious. "So what is the problem then," asked the professor. Everyone else in the yard was curious and waited for the head's answer.

The head replied, "With only one tree in the middle and the surrounding walls shaped as in a square, together they make this place a Chinese character "trap" . So I was wondering if I should get rid of this tree."

The professional team was shocked at this thought but appreciated the fresh and unexpected insight. "How can he perceive a place like this," the students whispered. In contrast, the local authorities took it as a rational consideration. The professor thought about it for a while and delightfully told the head it was unnecessary to destroy the tree for such kind of reason. The head, however, was not convinced, so the professor continued, "The doors already standing in

the walls surrounding the yard are out of the trap, so you should not worry about it.” The head’s finally frown gave way to loud laughter. He said he was impressed and persuaded.

### ■ Teaching in the Field

From the cozy backyard, the group returned to the hub. The township officers left immediately. The professor sat down and enjoyed a cup of coffee, but just fifteen minutes after his return, a student rushed into the hub from a project site, followed by another deputy-head and the project manager. She was responsible for checking the adjustments based on the design sketches, discussing them with the deputy-head. She went straight to the professor as soon as she saw him in the hub. She asked if he had time to review the sketches as she had adjusted them while in the field. The officers became active in the discussion on the project as the new administrative mechanism had made each officer responsible for an ongoing projects, thus the deputy-head present wanted to make sure the planners understood the current difficulties in the project. He continuously reminded the professor of conditions he might not have been aware of yet. For a short while, they had some differences in opinion on the details, so the group headed out to the construction site. After about thirty minutes later, they came back with a newly affirmed design. Then not long, a similar scene played out again, where another student came in, asking for comments on an adjusted plan.

This intense fieldwork seemed a daily routine. It was another ordinary day.

After ten days of working in the field, the students started to feel tired, rather than excited. Groups of students came back to the hub on and off throughout the afternoon as the weather was too hot. The students either leaned against the chairs to rest or discussed the progress of their work. The ring of a cell phone broke through the heavy atmosphere. It was the professor calling from one of the project sites, the seasonal orchard. He asked if there were students back in the hub from fieldwork and if they were interested, they could come to the orchard to see how to set out measuring lines in the field. The students back in the hub felt refreshed, and soon put on long-sleeve coats and hats, and made their way to the orchard.

Though the site was close to the hub, it took a long time for the students to reach it as there was not even a trail to the field. only wet mud everywhere, so once they had finally arrived, half the measuring work was already finished. The professor seemed delighted to see their arrival and asked if they had any idea how to set construction lines without a measuring machine in the countryside. The students had no clue. Thus, he taught them how to use a frame of reference, the

map and simple tools like bamboo sticks and white powder to transfer dots from the plans to the construction site [Figure 89].

“This is so exciting,” one student shouted, “I never thought we could work like this! We could never find this in the textbook.” The members of the construction team who had also followed the professor could not help laughing.



*Figure 89 Directing and teaching implementation skills on the site*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

### ■ Routine Meeting in the Evening

After a simple dinner in the dining room of the rural hotel, the table was temporarily turned into a work table. Students randomly picked a spot and continued their work in the evening, sorting the materials from their field investigation and making a work schedule for the next day. A small meeting was arranged for all members at about an hour after dinner. Students sat around and started to report their working progress from the day, as well as the problems they encountered in the field.

“It is good to have the studio closer to the field,” said one of the students responsible for the design of a reconstruction project, “so it is more convenient to visit the site, if we encounter any unexpected problems in the design. It is much better than imagining the possible situation from afar, which normally ends up in dead ends and costs plenty of time. It was helpful to make plans in the field.”

Another student also focused on a design offered her thoughts, saying “Though I have never officially worked in a design institute before, the work here, this time, was different from what I have heard of before. It is true that setting up the studio closer to the site helped us understand

the working context better, as well as to grasp more detailed information in and around the design subject. However, more importantly, I think constant communication with different actors is also helpful. Though we did not talk much with them in the meetings, we watched you (professor) negotiate with them. I now know more about the thoughts of different actors. It really helps to understand the project better.”

The group of students in charge of field interviews were not very optimistic. One student reported, “It is still hard for us to communicate with the locals. Their dialect is hard to understand.”

A student planning a structured interview added, “Not many of the villagers understood my questions. Even though they could understand the content of the questionnaire, they still hesitated to answer the questions. I could see their hesitation.”

The professor did not provide any comments during the discussion. He only encouraged their hard work and repeatedly warned them about the hot weather and not to do any field investigation alone.

The owner of the rural hotel and his wife expressed extreme interests in the practice being conducted in Shatan, though they were villagers in the next village. The owner sat by the table the whole time, trying to understand the emerging dynamics in Shatan. He told the professor that his village had once been a candidate for the local BVC program, together with Shatan. At first, his village had attracted much more attention than Shatan, due to its geographic location and natural resources. The first round of planned top-down interventions affected both villages, but unfortunately, the construction in his village did not follow the agreed plan. In his villager, they built many new rural apartments that either occupied the planned public spaces or negatively affected the newly introduced open space. This made it almost impossible to bring the township authority, the planning professionals and village representatives on board in the BVC program. In the end, his village was temporarily excluded from the local BVC plan.

The owner became more and more emotional as he talked. He was so depressed and a bit irritated with the current situation, saying, “We have much better recourses here in our village. It makes no sense to move the whole plan to Shatan.”

“Yes,” the professor answered, “you are right about the resources, but the villagers only cared about constructing their own houses, resulting in the sabotage of the resources.”

Their conversation ended with an incredibly long sigh from the hotel owner. Apart from the discussion with the professor, the owner and his wife were very interested in what the students talked about and the pleasure was mutual as chatting with them offered the students a lot more information that could not be obtained from regular interviews. The wife told the students, “I was so frustrated our village head was not able to do anything right. We, my family, all voted for the head in the election last time. The reason was not that he was capable, but we are a minority in this village. We moved from another place to this village, so we do not share the same family name here. We just wanted to support someone who could be fair to us. Unfortunately, though we put much effort into getting him elected, he did not do well and led to the exclusion of our village from the BVC plan. We never thought he could be so incompetent.” She also emphasized that before the planned intervention directed by the BVC, there was almost no business in Shatan. The markets all assembled in her village, but she was afraid the already established business in her village might be affected, given how much effort the township authority is putting into Shatan’s current development so close to her village. The future could change, and with millions of yuan invested in the village across the river, she felt threatened.

#### **Vignette 5: The Village Head’s Impact on the village Transformation**

The village head of Shatan was a regular visitor in the hub. He visited whenever he had time. Though dressed in a simple T-shirt, he would always draw a lot of attention when he entered.

As the village head, he was elected by the villagers, but it was not his actual job, or rather, it was a position without pay. His real job was as a rural entrepreneur, and he had several factories operating in the village on collective land. His were plastic model factories [Figure 90], constructed in the 1990s when rural land law was blurred between the use of collective construction land and the rural development policy encouraging nationwide industrialization. It was estimated by the township authorities that with these factories, the head had provided job for villagers near and far, and his annual income was in the millions.



*Figure 90 One of the factories in Shatan operated by the village head*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

On July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the annual summer practice in Shatan was taking place. It was the same village, and same hot weather but the design hub had shifted to the reconstructed clinic. The previous year, it had still been a construction site. This year, it had turned into a multi-functional design hub.

Early in the morning, students and planners came to the hub and started to prepare the maps and other related materials in the east meeting room, rather than picking spots to work as usual. Not long after their arrival, the township authorities came in with some new faces. The township governor introduced them as members from the Planning Bureau of Huangyan District, and their main purpose in coming was to coordinate the land use plan in Shatan. Almost an hour later, the village head, followed by the deputy-head, joined the meeting. As soon as the village head came in, the township governor urged him to join the discussion. He seemed vital.

Since he was late, he listened to the plan and the adjustments first. Then he seemed a little upset, saying that the modification to the plan was unacceptable as he had already prepared the land according to the previous plan. He added, “ It is already really hard for some of the planned projects.”

“So you can map your thoughts on the sketches,” said the professor, handing over a pen. At first, the village head was a bit hesitant but then picked up the pen and started to draw, explaining his thoughts on future development in Shatan. Then, the deputy-head drew some adjustments on the sketches after the head finished.

The township governor listened and then stepped into the discussion, strongly suggesting that the village head keep his mind open for other future development possibilities as well. The

negotiation following thereafter was conducted mainly between the township governor and the village head, and it was fierce. The township governor was concerned with the cost and the whole spatial structure of the plan, including regional connectivity and practical possibility, whereas the village head paid more attention to which plot of land would be more profitable to develop. Then, at last, the professor jumped in and summed up their requirements, trying to balance priorities from both sides based on the previously-drafted master plan. The rest of those present in the meeting listened carefully, providing few comments. The officers from the district planning bureau only emphasized that the adjusted plan should be finished before November and expected the draft at the end of August after the meeting.

At about seven in the evening, students and the other professionals were still working in the hub as the design work was intense and time in the field was limited. The weather was so hot and stuffy that everyone was kind of sweaty. All of a sudden, the village head cheerfully entered the studio again with a handful of sketches. He went straight to the professor and proudly presented the drawings in front of him, asking, "Professor, do you have time? What do you think of the designs for the reconstruction of my factories? I have several plans for the project now." He came again for suggestions as his factory buildings were considered by the local authorities to be huge and inappropriate compared with the other buildings around, but it was impossible to move them out of the village. The upper-level authorities, therefore, had two requirements. The village head was to update the manufacturing techniques, so as to limit the air pollution, but also had to change the façade of the buildings to match with the rest of the village.

"Let me have a look," said the professor, and he seriously went through every sketch. "These are all good designs, who did them?"

"I have cooperated with a college of fine arts in Guangzhou," answered the head, "They are now responsible for designing my products, so I invited them to do the façades."

"Though the design was not perfect," remarked the professor, "what do you think about some changes?" He offered a design draft based on those presented. The village head could not contain his joy and started to add his thoughts, discussing them with the professor. After hours of several rounds of adjustment, both were satisfied with the design and the head left happily.

### **Vignette 6: Owner of a New Noodle Restaurant Across the Street from the Design Hub**

A noodle shop was about to open opposite the design hub in the summer of 2016. It was behind the new community stage and close to Taiwei Temple. It was transformed by the owners of the property, an elderly couple, from an ordinary three-storey village apartment, rather than some old traditional building. The female owner of the pair was close to eighty and still dressed in the costume of the Republic of China sometimes. She was famous in the village for having participated in the local construction projects in her own way. Even the local authorities and village head asked the construction team to pay less attention to her.

The woman was not always out of her house, so the students responsible for the field investigation did not know her well, and yet, she always stepped out, walked a long distance to meet the professor and called him from far away when he came to the hub. She also enjoyed shaking hands with him. They could communicate directly with one another as the professor was from Shanghai and their dialects shared some similarities. Not to mention, he had been working in the village for years.

This old lady lived closed to the ongoing transformation projects, so she enjoyed the most changes and improvements to the open spaces and public facilities, and was affected the most at the same time. In April 2016, most of the projects for improving public spaces had been implemented, finished and were then operating. One day, after the rain, the professor, followed by students and other planners, were walking and dragging their suitcases across the new square. A familiar person, the old lady, went up to him quickly and called him in a loud voice. She was so happy to see him back in the village again. The professor greeted her and asked if she was satisfied with the changes. She gave him an affirmative answer, but she was not happy with the newly constructed public toilet and tried to address the problem with him. The professor suggested that they walk to the public toilet and see where exactly the problem was. With an expression of being finally rescued, the old lady tightly held his hands and led the group to see the problem. Their suitcases left on the square.

As they arrived at the public toilet, the lady pointed to the wall and complained, "They are too low. I can see inside of the toilet from the second floor of my home. I feel really uncomfortable about it. This is inconvenient for me." The professor estimated the height, then informed the local construction team to increase the height of the walls by three bricks. The old lady was satisfied with his quick decision.

A couple weeks later, the professor's team came for their routine field directions. Unexpectedly, the old lady rushed to the professor again and greeted him. He initiated the conversation, asking her whether the walls had been built up. She answered sadly, "Not yet," and she was eager to know when exactly the walls would be heightened. The professor told her it would be soon, then went straight to the hub. He asked the project manager about it as they sat down, "When will the wall be done?" The answer was next week.

Again, two weeks later, the same scene occurred and the walls still had yet to be adjusted. This time, the professor did not ask and waited until dinner when the key actors had joined together. He kindly asked if the construction team could prepare some bricks for him, so he could build the wall himself. The local authorities then knew the situation was serious and guaranteed that the wall would be done soon.

Another two weeks passed, and the professor was visiting again. The manager of the construction team greeted the topic with an apology as the old lady's request had not yet been fulfilled, but he promised the work would be done the following week, along with the redecoration of the community stage. Then, another two weeks passed and as per routine, the team arrived in Shatan. The old lady walked out to the square and welcomed the professor. There was a big smile on her face. She again firmly held the professor's hands and said delightedly that the wall had been built, and now the view from her house was better. This time, however, she complained her ground sill was affected by the construction of the community stage. She showed the professor cracks around her bench-table and the pillars in her house. The professor promised he would discuss the problem with the construction team.

Unexpectedly, when the professor brought up the matter in a meeting, the village head who was already aware of the situation scorned on it. He believed the lady was a troublemaker and she wrongly attributed the cracks in her house to the construction of the stage. However, as the professional team explained, there was a possibility that the construction was affecting her house since it was less than a meter from it, thus with the professor's insistence, they decided to help the old lady reinforce the groundwork of her house while redecorating the stage.



*Figure 91 A new noodle restaurant started by a villager*

*Source: Author's photograph(2016)*

In May 2016, many construction sites had been completed. The university team members noticed, while directing their projects, that the old lady's house across from the design hub was decorated [Figure 91]. The old lady warmly greeted them, happily and proudly introducing her son as he was back in the village. Her son prepared the ground floor of her house to run a noodle restaurant. They were not sure the future of their shop as it was the first business opened by the villagers on the old street after the BVC intervention.

Despite the rain, the young man was continued to work with dedication, decorating the ground floor with the help of hired workers. The professor warmly shook hands with him and encouraged him, saying, "You have the foresight. It is good that you bravely come back to start a new career in the village and invest in your hometown. We are more than happy to see this. And I hope you have better opportunities for success."

The students behind the professor also seemed excited and could not wait to discuss this new development. As one student having worked over three years expressed, "It was so exciting to see someone belonging to the village actually come back and start their business here. We were not sure about whether or not, or when the initiatives from the villagers would consciously join the local development as the new dynamic emerged. We were looking forward to this phenomenon every time we visited Shatan."

The professor's smile suddenly stopped, though, when he noticed that the young man was having the façade decorated. He went over and kindly reminded him that it was unnecessary to decorate it, since it was already nice, displaying the local features. "It would be much better to leave it as it

was,” the professor said. The young man already seemed to have an idea in mind, so he just smiled and continued decorating the façade with different pieces of stone. The team left them with their work and continued on into the hub.

The next day, after a day’s work in the field, the team assembled in the hub, along with the township governor. The professor recalled that the wall of the noodle shop had been half done. He could not ignore it and went to the young man again, telling him that the wall would be much better if it were retained as the way it was. The young man, however, believed more in what he had learned from the urban area in the past years, insisting that the wall would be better if it were decorated with brand new stones. The governor joined the conversation after figuring out what it was they were discussing, “You should listen to the professor’s suggestion. We insisted on our plan before, implemented it and it ended badly.” He laughed and continued, “Take his advice. Now we all listen to him for has never led us in the wrong direction.”

The young man hesitated, thinking the old wall was too shabby and would not attract many tourists, whereas a new one would. The professor left the struggling young man to himself and joked, “He will tear down the new decorations in the end, so it would be better to stop now.”

The next morning, the university members arrived at the hub as usual. None of them could help glancing at the noodle restaurant across the hub. Instead of building, the workers hired were tearing down what they had spent days paving. They told the team that the young man had decided to take the professor’s advice, thus preserving the old façade, rather than creating a new one.

### **Vignette 7: The Provincial Field Meeting**

The provincial field meeting was a top-down administrative approach. Its aim was, on one hand, to check what precisely had been done in villages with the specific policy and funding, and on the other hand, to involve relevant authorities in the administration to learn from each other’s experiences and approaches in real cases. This kind of meeting, with different themes on the agenda, were held either annually or several times a year, depending on how urgent the expectation of development was and how significant it was considered. Usually, the meeting was attended by powerful figures from among the leadership in provincial authorities, implementers in various administrative departments from provincial level to the township, and the mainstream media among others.

The provincial meeting of Zhejiang Province on the BVC was set to be held in either May or June 2016. The agriculture office in Huangyan selected three villages to be the “best practice” and arranged them in a tour for the attendees of provincial field meeting. Shatan Village was one of the three selected. After multiple attempts to coordinate the authorities’ time, the various construction time of projects among the different villages and the annual academic rural practice, the final date was set on the second of June.

Soon came the first of June. The rain was incredibly heavy in Shatan Village. The student group who had already arrived two days before were preparing for the meeting. They were anxious and concerned about the unexpected weather, wondering with uncertainty if the original arrangement of the provincial field meeting would go as planned the next day. The downpour was so heavy that the electricity went out several times throughout the whole village. Though it was normal to have a thunderstorm in the summer in the mountains, even the local authorities could sense its obvious intensity. A member of the government staff was a little bit frustrated, and told the students that he had prepared for the event for months. He said the construction team in charge of the BVC projects had not enjoyed a single weekend off, rather having to work in the field since March. This situation was the same for another village that had also been selected as the “best practice” to be visited during the meeting this time.

The arrival of the second of June did not halt with the rain and arrived like any other day. It was hard to tell when the local staff had started to standby for the event in the morning as people were heard busy preparing as early as six o’clock. The noises of people going back and forth through the main street of the old village was kind of loud. The rain was lighter than the previous day, but still prevented them from setting up all the prepared outdoor exhibition materials. Fortunately, as the day progressed, the rain gradually diminished. After the students finished breakfast, the outdoor exhibition was all set up. A mill providing traditional local tofu pudding was even arranged in the Chinese pavilion on the square. Moreover, all the shops on the main street started their business early, including the noodle restaurant, a book bar, an art workshop, a teahouse, steamed bread shop, wine bar and several other restaurants, among which only the bread shop was known near and far, whereas the rest were newly opened. There were also small retail businesses run by the residents [Figure 92].



*Figure 92 Small retail businesses run by the residents*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*



*Figure 93 Local residents from Shatan Village and the neighboring villages*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

Though still early in the morning, with plenty of time before the event, villagers living near and far gathered in Shatan. It was rare to have so many people assembled in the village on a Thursday, most of whom were old. Some of them silently waited and sat on wooden benches [Figure 93], while others either smiled or talked loudly as they walked through as if it were their first time. Among the locals, some carefully read the material presented on exhibition boards. They seemed to be checking out unknown stories regarding their village in the past several years, which led to the changes that were then introduced to them [Figure 94].



*Figure 94 Villagers touring around in the village before the provincial field meeting*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

There was a group of people who stood out in the crowd. In contrast to the locals wandering about, they rushed through the village, checking the shops and exhibitions among other things along the old street. They shuttled from one spot to another, making sure everything was in position.

The students from Tongji University, including dual degree foreign students, in the village for field investigation were also had a significant presence, representing an emerging (academic) dynamic in the village. Students both native and from abroad were aware of the event but knew little about the process and the effects. As they walked through Shatan, they noticed the street was not the same as it was the first day they arrived. There were new activities happening in the traditional houses of the old village. After finishing a tour around, they went back to the design hub and started to sort out their fieldwork in pairs. Their supervisor was already there, preparing a microphone for when he would explain the “Shatan Practice” to the delegation of provincial groups.

Unlike the other villages included in this event who had been selected as a positive example of the BVC in Zhejiang, where the township governors were the village presenter, the presenter of Shatan was the professor who had led its rural transformation and supervised every project implemented in the village. Therefore, he did not stay long. After he left, the students began a passionate discussion on the event and what would be presented for it. The German students, perhaps participating and witnessing this kind of activity for the first time, expressed some concerns. One of the students took it so seriously that she even asked whether or not she could go to the washroom.

Not long after the students' attention shifted back to analyzing the investigation data they had collected, noisy from outside the hub grew louder and louder. People's footsteps outside were hurried. There was not enough time to figure out what was happening as about a dozen people rushed into the hub, bearing incredibly large cameras, vidicon and lights. The whole room was suddenly lit up and unconsciously, everyone stood up. Then some provincial authorities strode into the room led by the professor. The small room was soon filled. Looking through the window facing the hall outside, they could see the building was full of people and there was no space for any more people to fit. The professor then gave a brief introduction of the annual academic activities in Shatan, and the authorities shook hands with the students, giving them warm greetings. The vice governor of the province asked a student about their work in Shatan and their feelings about it. The student was so excited and said, "It was a great opportunity for us to us to practice here and learn from real practices."

Soon, the people in the room started to leave but the people outside continuously came in and visited the hub in an endless stream. This lasted for at least ten minutes as the lively and joyful sounds from the old street could be heard clearly in the design hub. After a while, the sound of people on the street grew weaker and the students could not wait to rush out onto the street again. They started to enjoy their tour as if they were new arrivals. The street was even livelier than it was in the morning. The usual snacks vendors on the square were offering free food to all visitors. Many people were happy to do their own tofu pudding, manually grinding the fresh soybean milk. The book bar, along with other design studios, one of which was equipped with a 3D printer, were comparatively quiet, but local shops, especially the restaurants, were full of villagers from near and far. It seemed like a huge local festival. Villagers talked loudly with one another in the shops and on the street, appearing familiar with each other. An old man living on the street set up an informal "shop" in front of his house under his eave, selling some homemade dried vegetables, naturally grown in the surrounding mountains, but not many people were interested as most of them were the villagers themselves.



Figure 95 The indoor meeting after the field trip

Source: Author's photograph (2016)

The delegation's field trip through the selected villages finished, but it was only the prologue to the field meeting. For the next two days, meetings were held in the house [Figure 95]. On the third of July, the meeting took place in a huge meeting room in a Huangyan District hotel. All members of the delegation were gathered. The meeting committee had prepared guidelines, seminar materials and relevant media materials for them. Soon, the trends of the rural development in Zhejiang Province would be identified, recommended and encouraged based on field investigation, lectures, discussion and so on. The atmosphere was relaxed. The township authorities appeared far less tense than the day before. The head of Yutou Township met the professor at the doors of the meeting room. They congratulated one another with big smiles on their faces. The head said, "I was so relieved, and the field tour in Shatan went on so well. I heard some comments that many delegation members thought it was the best among the other villages. Thank you so much, professor."

Then the meeting started. The meeting agenda was divided into three parts. The first part was more like a seminar, where scholars of relevant disciplines presented their studies on the status quo of current rural development, evaluating policy performance, introducing experimental approaches in the rural transformation, so on and so forth. Scholars from different universities and research institutes took turns presenting their research findings. Their research strategies covered a wide range, from scientific analysis to the new practice of applying traditional Fengshui. This part did not include discussion or Q&A. Following closely behind them, the second part consisted of work assessments within the administrative departments. Then, on the fourth of July, the delegation met for the third part of their agenda, which was considered the

most essential. Only crucial members from the core of the administrative departments were invited. They discussed and identified major challenges in current rural development, approved or denied existing approaches from among different practices, and analyzed the performance of relevant policy base on investigation in the field and related research reports. The final meeting was presented by the vice-governor of Zhejiang Province who set the tone of future rural development. His approval of the practice in Shatan was explicit, so that during the meeting break, many officers were discussing it. They also tried to locate and invite the related professionals to be their development consultants. However, it was not easy to find such people at the meeting. The professor who led the practice in Shatan, for instance, though many approached him during the breaks, his hands were already full.

Following the provincial field meeting, the Shatan township authority became even busier. Delegations of officers responsible for rural development or practicing the BVC came from all over the country to visit the village to learn from their experiences in rural transformation. These delegates visited the design hub from time to time. “That the frequency of visiting delegates was so high,” complained the township head happily, “it was too tiring that I had to accompany them all day. There were three delegations from different parts of the country coming to visit the same day at different times, occupying all my time. One of them even came from Neimenggu Province (a northern province very far from Shatan).”

## **Discussion**

- (1) Official required planning documents are far from enough for rural transformation. On one hand, rural planning is easier with comprehensive systems, but on the other, it is much more complicated according to the professor’s experience in Shatan. Planning documents and sketches were not sufficient to direct rural constructions as local construction teams might not understand them, even if they understand that adjustments are necessary in the face of local construction technologies and unexpected field conditions. The local artisans’ strength was in construction, not dealing with unforeseen problems. Therefore, regular field directions from professionals who understand the rural context and local conditions are more necessary in rural development.
- (2) Intervention approaches for rural revitalization cannot be learned from current textbooks or from following experiences from urban development. Based on the feedback from students involved in the practice in Shatan, as well as evidence from the field investigation, interventions should be adapt better to combine with local approaches and fit local

conditions. The local context is key. This cannot be discerned from textbooks or anywhere else, thus it is crucial for (future) planners and designers to be aware before suggesting a proposal.

- (3) The professor played a crucial role in the BVC practice in Shatan. His personal understanding of the BVC policy, the vision of rural revitalization, and more importantly, interpretations of urban-rural relationships, led the practice in Shatan and west rural Huangyan as well. Also, his personal resources, such as support from university, and connections influenced a lot in the new development dynamic. He was a “super-connected” person.
- (4) Pilot projects were critical in garnering public investment in villages. As seen in the investigation, villages showed varying outcomes under the same BVC program as villages were administratively self-contained and villagers held the deeds to the land. Only when a village was truly willing to join the program did the public investment make progress. Thus, pilot projects are a good approach for finding possible cooperations.
- (5) Villagers in Shatan and from the neighboring villages held different attitudes towards the changes in Shatan. Most of the residents in Shatan were positive about the changes, while some felt excluded from future development. Some villagers from neighboring villages were eager to join the BVC and felt threatened by Shatan’s rapid transformation.
- (6) The village head played a significant role in the project, whereas the influence of district officers was indirect. Villagers’ rights over collectively owned land provided them greater leverage in negotiations of land development, though most of the time, power was concentrated in and represented by the village head.
- (7) Villagers’ participation in the interventions usually came during the last phase, the implementation phase. Though designs were presented to the public across various channels before the implementation, and even parts of it were shown in models displayed at the design hub, very few ordinary villagers contributed to the plans. However, some took part in the implementation and influenced the plan when it affected their property. If they were working on the construction teams, though, they contributed their intelligence to the details of constructions.

- (8) Villagers actively involved in the practice were more easily affected by the development strategies. In Shatan, the villagers who knew more about the plan and actively engaged with the process took initiative to transform their own properties, aiming at sharing the potential profits from the local development trend.
- (9) The practice reflected top-down policy and bottom-up initiatives. In the case of Zhejiang Province, the best practices in rural development were selected after rounds and rounds of field meetings at different prefectural levels and based on which regional rural development, requirements and criteria were formed. In this process, some of the best practices, such as Shatan, were scaled up to a new paradigm of regional influence.
- (10) Influential practices can be reflected in the regional rural development framework, but are not limited to it. As soon as they gained a reputation, the experiences affected much broader regions of China.

### **6.4.3 Public and Social Activities Promoted by the Practice**

#### **Vignette 8: Annual Local Cultural Event**

On the night of the twelfth of November 2015, the weather in Shatan was not yet so cold, yet deep in autumn, there was rain in the evening. Students from the Technical University of Berlin were visiting villages in Huangyan District. They came mainly for another, mostly abandoned, historical village close to Shatan. The hostess at the hotel they were staying in informed them there was a local cultural event in Shatan that evening, and they all decided to join, of course with Chinese students to accompany them. Shortly after their dinner in the rural hotel, the students headed together to the new community square in Shatan. Though still early, the sky was already became dark. Sounds from across the Rouji Brook grew louder and louder as they approached the stream. As they got closer, the sky lit up.

When the students arrived, the whole square was already filled with people [Figure 96]. A local drama was performed on the stage with much of the audiences sitting and enjoying the show from underneath a huge temporary plastic shed shielding them from the rain, but there were not enough seats under the shed, so some villagers squeezed into the Chinese corridors beside and at the other end of the square to watch the show. Some even stood in the rain to watch. The students could understand little about it as the drama was performed in the local dialect. The villagers, though, enjoyed the show very much. The rain could not spoil their fun as they laughed and clapped from time to time.



*Figure 96 The square filled with villagers*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*



*Figure 97 Huge candles for praying*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

“Are there so many people living in the village now,” asked one of the German students.

“I do not believe so,” answered one of the Chinese students who had worked three years locally, “I have never seen so many people in Shatan before.”

At the same time, many students detected the distinctive smell of smoke, which led them to Taiwei Temple next to the square. As they entered the temple, they were shocked. There was a noticeable rise in temperature as they stepped in. Countless little candles lined the shelves along the side. There were so many people gathered in the temple. Some of them were praying while burning incenses and lighting candles, others were engrossed in fortune-telling. It was no less crowded inside the temple than outside in the square.

The students were so curious about what they were seeing that they asked if they could take some pictures, since they were in a religious place. One student familiar with the local culture told them to go ahead, so they started taking pictures, carefully as they toured around the temple. However, the students were even more shocked when they turned their backs, finding large candles, some of which were even taller than an adult male, occupying a stage in the temple and laying opposite the Status. An old man, staggering on the desks beneath the stage was slowly rearranging them [Figure 97]. It seemed more large candles were waiting to be put up.

Walking out of the temple, many students had already started to drink some beer, looking for local snacks. Usually, there were no food vendors in the village, especially in the evening. On this particular day, however, the alley stemming from the east side of the square was full of small vendors selling various foods, including traditional foods but mostly barbecue. The conditions did not seem sanitary, yet still, many people were buying and eating happily. Walking along the alley down to the new parking lot, which was usually empty, was packed full. Many vehicles had to park along the road.

At almost nine o'clock in the evening, the performance was over, but the fun continued with people talking, laughing and praying. The joy filled atmosphere was not affected at all by the constant drizzle overhead.

### **Vignette 9: Summer Activities for the Local Students**



*Figure 98 Pupils' bicycles randomly parked on the square*

*Source: Author's photograph (2016)*

On the twenty-ninth of July, 2016, the students from the CAUP at Tongji University were walking in Shatan for fieldwork as usual, when a new phenomenon in the village caught their attention. There were many young students' bicycles randomly parked outside a building at the end of the community square, in front of the Taiwei Temple [Figure 98]. Wood and bricks made one half of the building, while glass and steels made the other. Previously, a Buddhist restaurant was planned in it.

“Young pupil,” one of the students wondered, and then exclaimed with excitement, “Let’s go and check it out!” They almost rushed right into the building. Normally, the wooden half was closed as it was temporarily used as the Party’s office and a children’s caring center. The students had never seen any children in the room before. As they drew close to the building though, the door was wide open. Hot air flowed out. They were so glad to see the space being used. Curious, they observed from the windows for a while before they venturing inside. They wanted to be sure their behavior would not cause a disturbance.



*Figure 99 Pupils’ summer activity in the new public place*

*Source: Author’s photograph (2016)*

There were a dozen boys and girls around eight years of age sitting inside. Some were busy writing something, others played in pairs or sat alone, and the rest seemed too tired, lying on the table for a nap [Figure 99]. It was a bit noisy inside. The students did not see any adult from the window. As they stayed, eventually they heard a female voice from the back of the room. The woman was trying to quiet them down. Hearing her voice, the students decided to go in and interview her and figure out this new activity. Hot air assaulted them as they walked in. Even with fans on, they were not enough to cool down the room. Walking to the back of the room, the students found three women chatting. They approached them, wanting to ask some questions on the young students’ activity, and alerted the women of their presence.

In Mandarin, one of them asked cautiously, "Who are you?"

The women might have spent little time in Shatan, since they did not recognize the students from their t-shirts. The students introduced themselves again, asking what the young students were doing. The three were still nervous and answered, "This is a program for summer holidays and most of the pupils are doing their holiday assignments."

The light at the back of the room was faint but the students saw an advertisement beside the women, reading "Yutou Children's Home, Spring Mud Plan." Seeing it, one of the students asked if all the young ones were from surrounding villages and the women said yes. Though they wanted to know more, the conversation was hard to continue as the women were still nervous and skeptical of them.

### **Discussion**

- (1) Villagers frequent the new public places. Sometimes, official activities are organized in these spaces. Though Shatan was faced with a shrinking population and aging populace, the local's social and cultural lifestyle should not be considered any less. On the contrary, public places should support and encourage collective activities and daily communication.
- (2) Public spaces do not necessarily have to be traditional to emphasize local culture and to promote community interactions. The critical issue is not how to shape a space but where to place it. This is not to suggest that spatial patterns and designs are unimportant, but since villagers are flexible and imaginative, shape should not be a priority. What matters is where to set it up, as well as how to integrate it into existing activities and everyday habits.
- (3) Local religions and customs played an unimaginable yet crucial role in Shatan and in neighboring areas. Based on the villagers' enthusiasm for the cultural-religious activities, as well as the money they were willing to spend for them, one could thus deduce their reliance on them. Local culture and religion affects the residents in both their daily lives and significant decisions.
- (4) Young children, women and seniors comprised a major part of the residential demographic in Shatan. They were also the main ones participating in social and cultural activities. They frequented the public places in the village, where it was observed that females outnumbered males.

### **6.5 Preliminary Conclusion**

Shatan is a village situated in the western mountains of Huangyan District. It takes an hour's drive from the village to urban Huangyan, and the village is under no pressure to urbanize with

many of its residents retaining most of the local customs. They still enjoy dinner outside their houses whenever the weather is fair, even without backyards anymore. Occasionally, they wash clothes in the river, even without streams flowing in front of the houses and with tap water available in their homes. They even still use firewood, picked from the surrounding mountains, to cook, though there is gas available [Figure 100]. The physical environment may have changed due to domestic urbanization and agendas for globalization, but substantial local values still remain an influence in Shatan.



*Figure 100 Villagers' everyday life and their habits*

*Source: Author's own photograph (2015)*

Many villagers no longer own any farmland apart from their homesteads (Zhajidi). There were strict regulations on the houses build on these homesteads. Though agritainment (or homestay) was a possible option to increase income, most of the local labor force, especially those younger than fifty, were working in urban areas as the local market had yet to form. Unexpectedly, according to some interviews, some villager had been practicing farming in other regions. Due to insufficient and unstable annual incomes, residents would continue working at sixty, seventy, even late as eighty. This phenomenon was frequently observed throughout Shatan as many elderly people took some informal jobs, working in front of their houses to make string clips for instance. On Occasion, some of them even engaged in heavy physical labor [Figure 101].



*Figure 101 Some temporary jobs for aged villagers*

*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

The SNV program that started sometime around 2005 demolished the eastern side of the village, constructing new rural apartments. It was stopped with the launch of the BVC program in 2013. The BVC practice in Shatan enlisted professional efforts from Tongji University. It was considered an exploratory practice attempting to find alternative approaches of spatial intervention, rather than following common practice, though it was a top-down development commission motivated by state investment. The practice was guided by the theory of urban-rural interaction and a strategy of integrated development on social, economic and environmental issues. The engagement of the university professionals in the BVC practice, as well as actor involvement, shifted the approaches in conventional planning and the assessment criteria. It is undeniable that the experimental practice provided innovative and advanced planning methods for rural development, sharply contrasting with other rural interventions, which were largely affected by the current norms and planning orthodoxies. Thus, there are several positive effects of the ongoing practice in Shatan worth discussing.

The first effect was new functions introduced to formerly unwanted public places. For example, the former latrine pits out the houses were replaced by a decent public toilet, supporting a basic need of the villagers in the old village. An abandoned veterinary station was transformed into an exhibition space to increase communication between the residents, planners, authorities and other potential actors. A community stage was introduced to support the local culture and traditions, while a square located in front of that stage, was redesigned to enrich everyday leisure activities and provide a flexible and open space for the locals. This spatial intervention encouraged social activities, but more importantly, for Shatan, which was neither outstanding in its natural resources nor its geographic locations, it made Shatan more competitive against other villages in the neighbouring region for future development.

Apart from these new functions, the second effect was the respect, preservation and enhancement of traditional building styles and spatial structures, as well as increasing local-identity in the eyes of the villagers, urban dwellers and the region. The demolition plan for rural transformation made in 2004 was stopped. Instead, new places were introduced within existing spatial structures. The new projects either reused previously abandoned collective properties or followed natural, cultural and spatial characteristics of the locale. This makes them more appreciated by the locals and township authorities who frequent them. Due to the spatial transformation projects, attitudes of some influential local actors, including the township authorities and village representatives, shifted from adoring urban elements to local ones. They showed an increasing interest in the village's cultures and origins, and started to engage the local culture and history more actively. In the same sense, the rural elements shown by Shatan attracted more and more urban visitors who were impressed by it, amending their original bias that rural places were underdeveloped and unpleasant.

The third effect was the broader focus attracted to Shatan following its revitalization transformation. The improvement in its built environment and the enrichment of its local activities formed an impressive regional calling card. This led to an increased investment of specialized funding from the district government in the distribution of annual rural development budgets, yet at the same time, the topicality caused by the success of the BVC practice in Shatan drew tourists, visitors and investors from near and far, such as from Xinjiang Province for instance [Figure 102]. Their visits also increased opportunities for local development.



*Figure 102 Visitors from Xinjiang Province*  
*Source: Author's photograph (2015)*

The fourth effect was the valuable practical experiences reflected in different working frameworks, rather those based in standard cases. As it was mentioned earlier, the BVC policy was a newly promoted policy for rural revitalization. It was a direct investment in rural-area renewal projects, though it did not provide a clear path for the practice at first. Grassroots experiences, guided by profound understandings of policy and dialectic recognition of urban-rural interactions, were thus needed to contribute to the policy frameworks. The practice in Shatan stood out as one of the provincially-approved best cases, contributing a significant part to the provincial working guidelines for rural transformation. Its influence spread nationwide in 2018, resulting in the practice scaling up to a new paradigm in rural revitalization. On a more practical level, the Shatan practice acted as an example for practitioners, or policy implementors, within or beyond the existing administrative framework to view alternative approaches of rural transformation, apart from the practice of large-scale demolition and rural apartments construction.

The fifth effect was its indirectly contribution to the promotion of the local government officers. The practice was well-accepted and approved by provincial-level authorities. Thereafter, the core members directly in charge of and that had participated in the practice were promoted. They were offered better career opportunities from district-level officers to township officers. The rest of the members who took part in the practice were also awarded in various ways. These encouragements motivated the local authorities' initiatives and enthusiasm to dedicate themselves to the development of rural revitalization, and those promoted had better chances of expanding the work approaches and valuable experience to other areas.

The last effect to mention, and the most important one of all, was how the experimental approaches in Shatan reflected, addressed and repeatedly emphasized the differences between methods for urban and rural planning. Unlike the conventional process for rural planning, mainly derived from experiences in urban development, the Shatan practice did not follow any planned routine, such as starting with a short period of field investigation, sometimes without any fieldwork, and ending up with the (official) required documentation of plans. Instead, it started with a large-scale field investigation conducted by a team of graduate students from Tongji University, majoring in urban planning, guided by an experienced professor. They stayed in Shatan for over two weeks in their initial visits. The core members made regular visits every two weeks. The fieldwork was comprehensive, including surveys with questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and group discussions. With their work, the planning team observed local needs and gradually formed local perspectives aiding in the formulation of planning

strategies later on. Compared to what was commonly regarded as the “best practice”, the projects in Shatan respected the local context, including the historical foundations of structures, culture and local skills. This provided more opportunities to make use of local intellect, involving relevant actors in the process. Instead of piles of unreadable plans, the team provided more services and strategies of flexible cooperation. This led to the introduction of a new mechanism in the form of a 24/7 online consultant available through chat groups in social media, through which primary actors among governmental authorities, the local project implementation teams, academic professionals and the students participating could connect. An efficient channel for communication and negotiation was opened, allowing for instant feedback on various aspects. The aim here was to guarantee that implementation was in exact accordance with the design plan, but when unexpected circumstances turned up in the field, necessary adjustments could be made in a very timely manner. This, therefore, solved the problem of unreadable plan documents directing rural development.

Despite the afore listed achievements, the six-year experimental practice also raised some critical concerns, which are worth discussing as well, especially when the judgment of the practice was supposed to be made on the sustainability of emerging local development dynamic-the fundamental aim of the contemporary rural transformation. The concerns to consider were the allocation of limited resources, the lack of involvement by vital actors in the initial phases of the process, and the fact of the man leading the project.

In essence, the first concern begs the question, “Was there a better way to allocate the limited recourses?” While an improved physical environment did increase the rural community interactions, village competitiveness and opportunities for the development of tourism, one must wonder if the plan could have integrated more local requirements. In interviews, some villagers expressed doubt of the benefits of tourism development. As one villager said, “...at most seven to ten percent of of locals could benefit from the development of tourism if the strategy is successful.” Another villager over sixty, living in the new village, was not positive about the development strategy. “I wanted to participate in the discussion about our village’s development,” he said, “but I do not think they (the local authorities) will take me seriously.”

As shown at some big events, activities were mainly organized in the old village and tourists were not interested in the small resident-operated shops as most of them were locals. Moreover, most villagers shared a common concern, believing the money could be used to improve the social insurance they had not yet received, but that many other villagers in neighboring areas

already had. Though the local built environment was important, as well as introduction of new functions, it was crucial to integrate the concerns over the risks of tourism development and the villagers' urgent needs. Connecting existing local networks to broader networks and activating local vitalities and initiatives were imperative in forming sustainable development dynamics. Whether the current intervention, the projects' implementation sequences, was the best choice or not still requires careful contemplation, given the absence of enough residents who would be using and living in the space to contribute to the development plan when it was conceived [Figure 103]. Normally, villagers only participated in the implementation through field discussion, leasing contract or artisans.

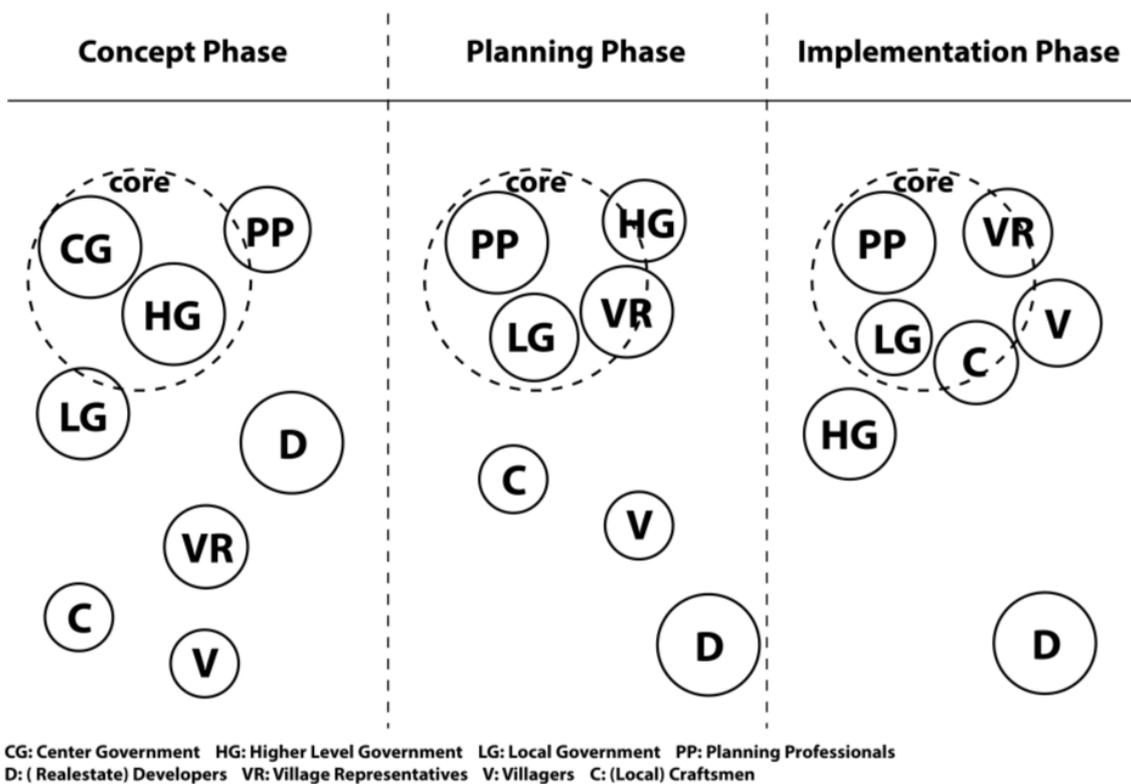


Figure 103 Actors' engagement and their shifting roles at different phases

Source: Author's construction

As just noted, the second concern was that a vital actor, namely developers or the market, was not involved in planning during the initial phases. The absence of a critical stakeholder during the early stages of the program led to reasonable concerns. The difference was apparent between ordinary days and events when there were tourist and tourist-centric activities, even in the old village [Figure 104], where the BVC projects stood and were highlighted. The tourism development was still at the primary stage in 2016. Even this progress was largely promoted by limited few administrative events, academic activities and traditional festivals. During regular

business days, there were few tourists on the old street and few shops open as compared with days of special events.



*Figure 104 A comparison between normal days and event days on the old street of the village*

*Source: Mengyi Z. and Author's photograph (2016)*

This then begs the question of how well the market would accept the development patterns, of if developers would support the plan and the mechanism of operation, if they were involved early on. One must wonder if the projects still would have been developed and continued as planned without intense public investment, given developers are usually more interested in short-term benefits, rather than long-term returns. These aspects are particularly important with regard to the development of tourism and a sustainable dynamic. The absence of the market in the early stages also resulted in additional and unnecessary roles for the local authorities in the process of vitalizing the local economy.

The last concern to consider was that the project was promoted and led by an experienced university professor who was not only willing to dedicate his time but also participated in in-depth rural planning. He was also able and qualified to conduct some informal methods for the spatial interventions and brought in additional resources, for instance, organizing annual national and international academic workshops. In this case, the development priorities and spatial justice identified in rural development were primarily dependent on the professor's personal experiences, recognition and judgment of urban-rural interactions, even though the professional decisions were based on suggestions and requirements from various actors. This meant the whole transformation was actually led by one very qualified and super-connected person, relying on his intelligence and resources. This, therefore, leads to the last question here: Could this practice be (easily) replicated in other rural areas without the engagement of such a key person?

## **Part 3 Reflections, Conclusion, and Contributions**

## Chapter 7: Case Study Comparison

Because we do not believe there is any singly correct 'solution' to such challenges, our questions are intentionally open-ended. The goal, we repeat, is to open up horizons for thought and action, and through collective dialogue, investigation and debate, to begin to explore these horizons (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011, 227).

### 7.1 The Projects' Achievements

#### 7.1.1 Alternative Planning and Design Approaches

As was addressed in the previous chapters, villages in China (specifically referring to those villages that will remain rural for the foreseeable future) have been affected by development plans that tended to either intervene directly in the villages by urban spatial intervention approaches, or simply refurbished the existing built environment, without substantially affected the dynamics of the villages. However, rural urbanization did not proceed as expected or desired. The anticipated outcomes of these development plans did not come to fruition, which led to inter-disciplinary deliberations and the encouragement of new exploratory practices in rural regions. The practices in Xianqiao and Shatan – although different in many respects – stand out and provide alternative planning and design approaches for rural transformation.

Based on the research, the alternative methods attempted in Xianqiao and Shatan positively affected their revitalization, illustrating that at least six different aspects (discussed in detail below) must be emphasized in terms of their contemporary rural transformation.

#### ■ **Respect vs. Destain**

Villages, compared to cities, are much smaller residential units with less complex support systems, composed of a small network of individuals who have been familiar with each other for years, possibly even generations. This context, however, does not make a possible transformation any easier. Conversely, a dismissive attitude – compared to a receptive, respectful, approach – toward villages is unlikely to produce a promising result.

Taking the case studies as an example: The DESIGN Harvests's practice developed its initial concept based on a respect for the natural environment of Xianqiao, through an emphasis on eco-friendly practices. Equally important, by respecting the values embedded in traditional rural production methods and local culture, a fundamental understanding of Xianqiao was elucidated, which was able to inform the project as a whole. On the one hand, the practice

took “design” as a method – aimed at increasing the value-add of the identified elements; on the other hand, it also reduced misunderstandings about the rural. As such, the DH respected the original socio-spatial structure of the village. It did not tear down any houses, nor did it bother to refurbish the facades. The whole project’s emphasis lay on local agriculture and its experiences, which was allowed for the bridging of rural networks by design and for the encouragement of urban-rural interactions by design.

Similarly, the other case study of Shatan also prioritized respect for the local community. Together the local history, culture, religion, collective properties, and other tangible and intangible legacies of the village encompassed the fundamental understanding of Shatan. Based on this knowledge, an initial concept was developed by the Tongji university team, wherein essential local features were neither changed, nor destroyed, but were emphasized throughout the practice.

#### ■ **Technical paperwork vs. Practical engagement**

Both projects provided substantial evidence for the weakness of existing, officially required, planning and design documents, which were borrowed from urban development, and redeployed as the most ubiquitous introductory steering instrument in rural transformations. Generally speaking, the planning documents and design blueprints are either barely digested by villagers or they lack an awareness of the obstacles standing in the way of local implementation. Furthermore, the quality of the documents themselves is often lacking. As such, rural transformation processes directing by the documents is often problematic.

To avoid the negative effects of the existing documents, both of the university-led practices attempted an approach of long-term local engagement.

DESIGN Harvests only began to implement its plan in Xianqiao after two years of field investigation. The university team spent approximately seven years supervising the implementation and operation of DH, before it was transformed into an independent company. DH continues to work closely with the original university team after this transformation. Specifically, the projects implemented in Xianqiao did not follow a series of discrete steps, beginning with designers’ blueprints and ending with the final construction by the workers. Instead, various related actors – led by the university – were closely involved in the projects from the initial plans to the final construction. Beyond that, the project did not end after the construction phase was completed. Since the DH university team (and then

subsequently the DH company) was engaged in the project from initial concept to final operation, adjustments in the field could be regularly made in response to unexpected conditions and operational feedback.

In addition, fealty to the planning documents was also not the ultimate priority, and – for the project conducted in Shatan – these documents were occasionally only produced in the final phase of implementation, despite the project’s characterization as a top-down process. The engagement of the various professionals was observed by the researcher from the beginning of their field research, to the conception of proposals (and their adjustment), the construction phase, and the operational phase through stays in the village, regular visits, and 24/7 supervision online. These professionals worked closely with relevant actors in the field, rather than in a design studio situated far away. Only polished paperwork was taken back to the design studio. In addition, the practices put into place in Shatan by the leading actor of the university creatively enhanced local engagement in various ways, helping to share first-hand information among related actors, and allowing for efficient feedback to the professionals, which encouraged further dialogue.

This level of engagement allowed the professionals to shift their perspective from outsiders to locals, while those practices which were only aimed at producing the required formal documents did not allow for the critical changes to happen.

### ■ **Long-Term vs. Short-Term Development**

Another distinctive characteristic of rural transformations, reflected in both case studies, is the length of time it took for a local dynamic to form, in comparison to a speedier process seen in urban development in China. Rural areas, unlike urban areas, are slow to attract resources and public interest, and are more sluggish in their responses to shifting networks. On the one hand, villages, on their own, cannot afford to develop quickly; on the other hand, new development dynamics are only formulated with great difficulty. In the best-case scenario, it takes two to three years (sometimes even less) in China for new urban districts to develop and for urban renewal projects to spark new dynamics. However, the experiences of both of the case studies indicate that, in rural settings, it takes much longer for villages to respond to the interventions and transform themselves, even with the engagement of the best teams. It took Xianqiao about five years to reach a tipping point; it also took approximately five years for Shatan to jumpstart its development and to gradually regain its vitality, after years of decline due to shrinking resident size, an aging society and a

downsizing economy. Ultimately, the processes involved in this transformation, from initial intervention and acceptance by local villagers to the final stages of rural development, are gradual and much slower than in urban environments.

### ■ **Appropriate vs. High-Tech Transformations**

A common perspective on the rural often centers on its backwardness. While there is some truth to that impression, it does not automatically mean that modernization is the correct tactic for improving the situation in rural villages. In the past, rural transformations sometimes concentrated on upgrading villages through transformative high technology and modern equipment, and even certain mirrors of urban life (such as theme parks, business streets, leisure belts, all meaningless for local residents) among other so-called modernizing concepts. However, these costly approaches were sometimes helpless in the face of regarding the villages dying from inside, suffering from social problems rather than merely physical environment problems.

Both rural transformations in Xianqiao and Shatan were not characterized by advanced, high-technology, transformations, but rather by a development dynamic that appropriately combined technology with the local production context.

### ■ **Externally-Driven vs. Internal Growth**

Profit-oriented or profit-seeking schemes tend to thoughtlessly embed external projects in rural areas rather than stimulate development dynamics locally. Though the villages are small and face serious labor resource loss through urbanization and globalization, the heterogeneous characteristics (in terms of physical features, culture, history, and developmental dynamics) of the villages are vitally important to rural transformation, a fact that is rarely reflected in profit-oriented projects. Evidence from the two case studies (both led by Tongji University professors) shows that their priorities were not to rapidly maximize profits as a return on investment but to search for new paradigms of rural transformation/revitalization. Because of this mindset, a great deal of research, as well as a pilot period (observed by the author), was conducted in order to allow for an identification of the essential features of the villages (and their development dynamics), which would affect the plans in a substantial way.

### ■ **Interconnected vs. Isolated**

Last but not the least, a village may be small and limited in resources, but a development plan that restricts its perspective to each village in isolation is bound to fail. Trapped in the

small-scale, the analysis of villages has always been restrained to its limited population, regional context, and resource base. However, within the experimental practices, rural transformation was located in a regional, even global context, while maintaining its ties to local features.

In the case of Xianqiao, development plans creatively related local agricultural production to emerging trends in organic food production; while the project in Shatan linked local cultural and historical legacies to requirements in national development plans, which listed rural transformation (with an emphasis on regional cultural and historic preservation) as a priority, thereby alleviating shortages in regional cultural tourism. Both practices indicated that although the villages are small in many respects, the perspective on them cannot and should not be restrained to a small area if revitalization is the development objective. Local development and regional development agendas might come into collision with each other, but they are not necessarily irreconcilable.

### **7.1.2 A Regional Calling Card- More Than a Spot Seen on the Map**

Xianqiao and Shatan are ordinary villages and hardly visible on regional development maps. The university professionals specifically chose them to experiment with new planning and design concepts. The DESIGN Harvests project emphasized ecological agricultural production and design, while the practice in Shatan highlighted the cultural and historical legacies of the village and academic activities focusing on urban-rural interactions. Through the transformation process, both villages became indisputable models for the regions in which they are embedded. This connotation of the villages as calling cards for their regions is reflected in the following:

#### **■ New Practice Paradigms**

Xianqiao Practice, introduced by its designers at several global exhibitions and regularly discussed at domestic conferences, is the only lived practice in the book of “Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation” (Manzini 2015). As a rural transformation paradigm that has attracted scholars, designer, artists, practitioners, etc. from all over the world, its influence has extended into various geographical areas and sub-disciplines, as people interested in the practice actively spread their knowledge and discuss their experiences.

The rural development project in Shatan is one of the best exemplars of the Beautiful Villages Construction program in Zhejiang province. Since 2015, its experiences have been widely

analyzed from an interdisciplinary perspective and closely followed by government authorities and think-tanks across the country. The Zhejiang Provincial Field Meeting affirmed the working methods in Shatan in 2016, by including their experiences in the official recommendations to the region, and by incorporating them into the regional guidelines and criteria for rural transformation. Most importantly, through its successes in Shatan, the practice became a model for rural development nationally. Xinhua News Agency's financial newspaper "National Finance Weekly" reported positively on the practice in an article, "Huangyan Report: Rural Revitalization Working Approaches," in April 2018. In nearly ten thousand words, the cover piece discussed the "Ten Working Methods," summing up the practice of rural revitalization in Shatan. The "Focus Report" – founded by the CCTV News Review Department in 1994 for the distribution of tracking reports on current events, background analysis, and social hotspots, as well providing public commentary – also reported on and underlined the practice in 2018.

#### ■ **Public and Private Investment**

Noticeable increases in public and private investment were observed in both villages as the reputation of the villages increased and was continuously reinforced by the various development practices. Initiated by the government, entrepreneurs, and even local villagers, an ever-growing number of projects and practices were introduced in both villages.

#### ■ **Portal to the Region**

In the various media channels, both projects are taken as the regional gateway for discussions on rural transformation and rural experiences. Both the traditional channels (including TV and newspapers) and information channels (including social media platforms, e-news, etc.) constantly provide updated news about the progress of the development projects and activities in both villages.

### **7.1.3 Re-establishment of Rural Identities**

Two cases greatly contributed to re-establishment of local identities from different perspectives.

#### ■ **Local Perspectives on Village Identities**

Generally speaking, the restoration of villagers' local identity refers to an increase in positive association with the village, and villagers' acceptance of that local identification. Villagers usually have strong emotional ties to the village that they belong to, but they may be unaware of what makes their village unique and why it might be necessarily value an

identification with it. Consequently, from the villagers' perspective, local identities are strengthened through in various activities, that emphasize the physical features of the built environment, as well as Xianqiao and Shatan's intangible elements, including local culture and history. To be more specific, the restoration of a positive association for the villagers must not limited to knowing or perceiving the place in which they live, or increasing personal pride. In both cases, the meaning of local identities was further extended to encouraging local social life and other public activities. Daily lives and community activities are enhanced by providing suitable and much-needed public spaces. The highlighted public spaces increased or gradually stimulated the recovery of community communication and a sense of interconnection.

#### ■ **Outsider Perspectives on Village identities**

From the perspective of village outsiders, their previous awareness of the villages was changed through their experiences in the two villages. Most visitors expressed a similar opinion, that change in rural settings was unimaginable. After various pleasant experiences in the villages, rural regions no longer carried the previous impressions of a dirty, tedious, and homogenous place, replaced by a notion that the villages were surprisingly unique and amiable settings.

#### ■ **Regional Perspectives on Village Identities**

The changed impression of the villages also affected regional awareness of rural identities. In both case study regions, rural areas are no longer a political and economic hot potato which is presumed to slow down regional development. The "rural" is no longer recognized as a problem area requiring a great deal of funding from the annual public budget, but still resistant to revitalization activities or new development projects. Conversely, diversified development opportunities are gradually becoming conceivable.

## **7.2 Who Wins and Who Loses?**

The practices in Xianqiao and Shatan optimized the processes of rural transformation in various respects, including planning methods and procedures, implementation approaches, and project operations. New development processes have also been created in the years since Tongji University began engaging in the practices. However, the winners and losers within this process have as of yet not been thoroughly discussed. To answer the main questions proposed in this research, it is crucial to dive into a more in-depth analysis of the changes among different actors.

How did they shift, what kind of relationships (and their limits) linked them together and/or restrained them, and how did interactions differ after the transformation of the villages? To further reveal these transitions, the actors and their inter-relationships were mapped and analyzed before and after the interventions were conducted.

The actors (as defined in Chapter 4) that were mapped and analyzed in this study were those who were observed during their direct or indirect involvement in rural development in the two villages. The relationships in between them were categorized into four types, based on the level of impact observed between each pair of actors, from weak indirect impact, to indirect impact, direct impact, and strong direct impact. For example, the national land policy has a strong direct impact on villagers, while villagers have only a weak indirect effect on national land policy. The interconnections were not subdivided further in this research, as an sufficiently objective judgment on the degrees of connections, based solely on observation and interviews, was impossible; whereas the credibility of the four levels proposed can be guaranteed. Therefore, based on the hierarchy presented above, the actor-networks concerning rural development in Xianqiao and Shatan respectively were constructed and visualized, and the evidence analyzed and discussed.

### **7.2.1 The Expansion of the Actor-Network**

One of the most apparent and direct changes observed in the actor-networks was the increase in the number of actors involved in both villages as the rural development process took hold through the transformation projects.

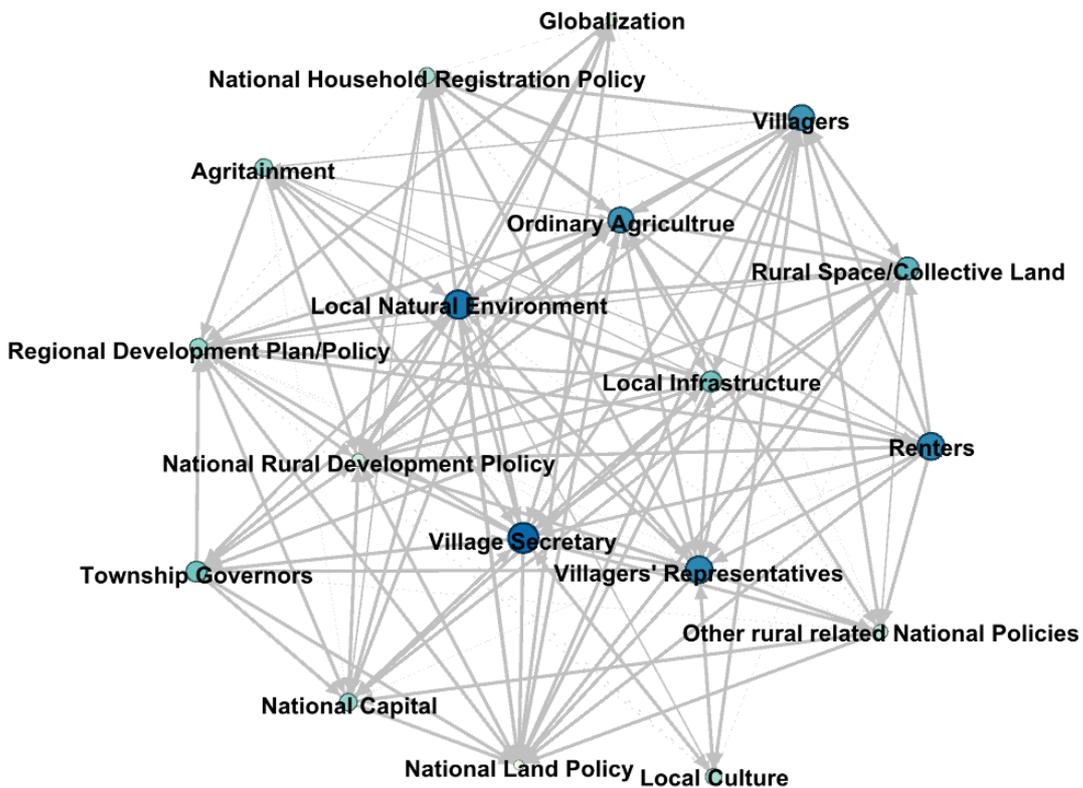
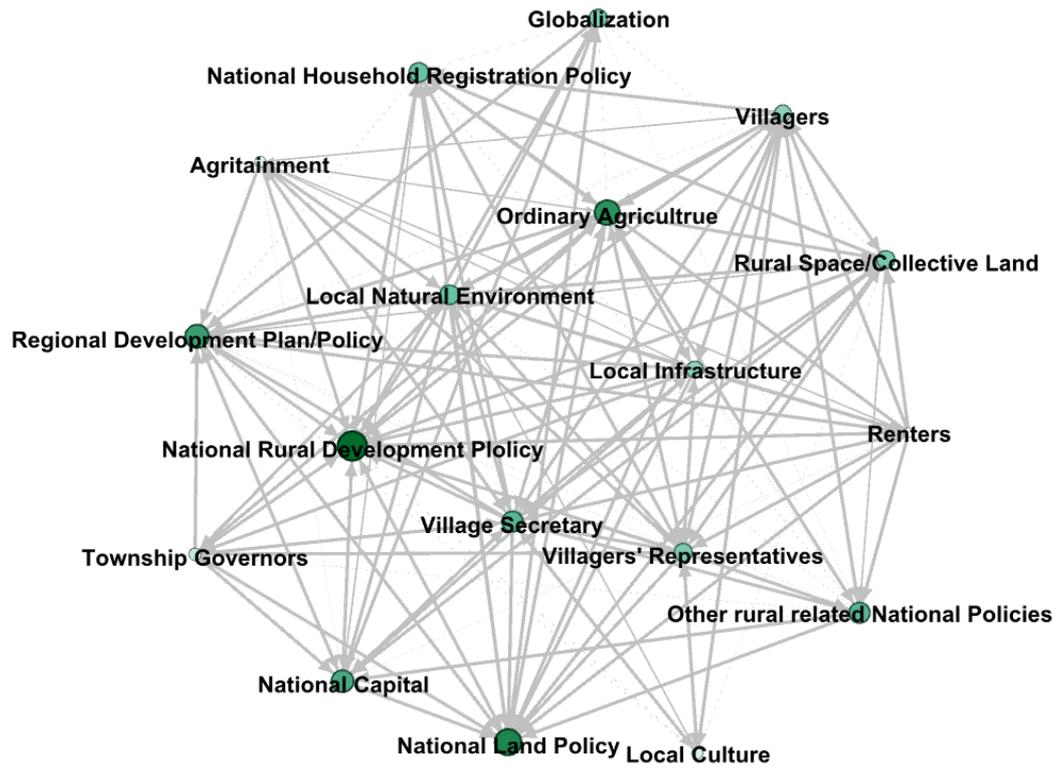


Figure 105 The actor-network before the university engaged practice in Xianqiao Village: dependence (up) and dominance (bottom)

Source: Author's construction

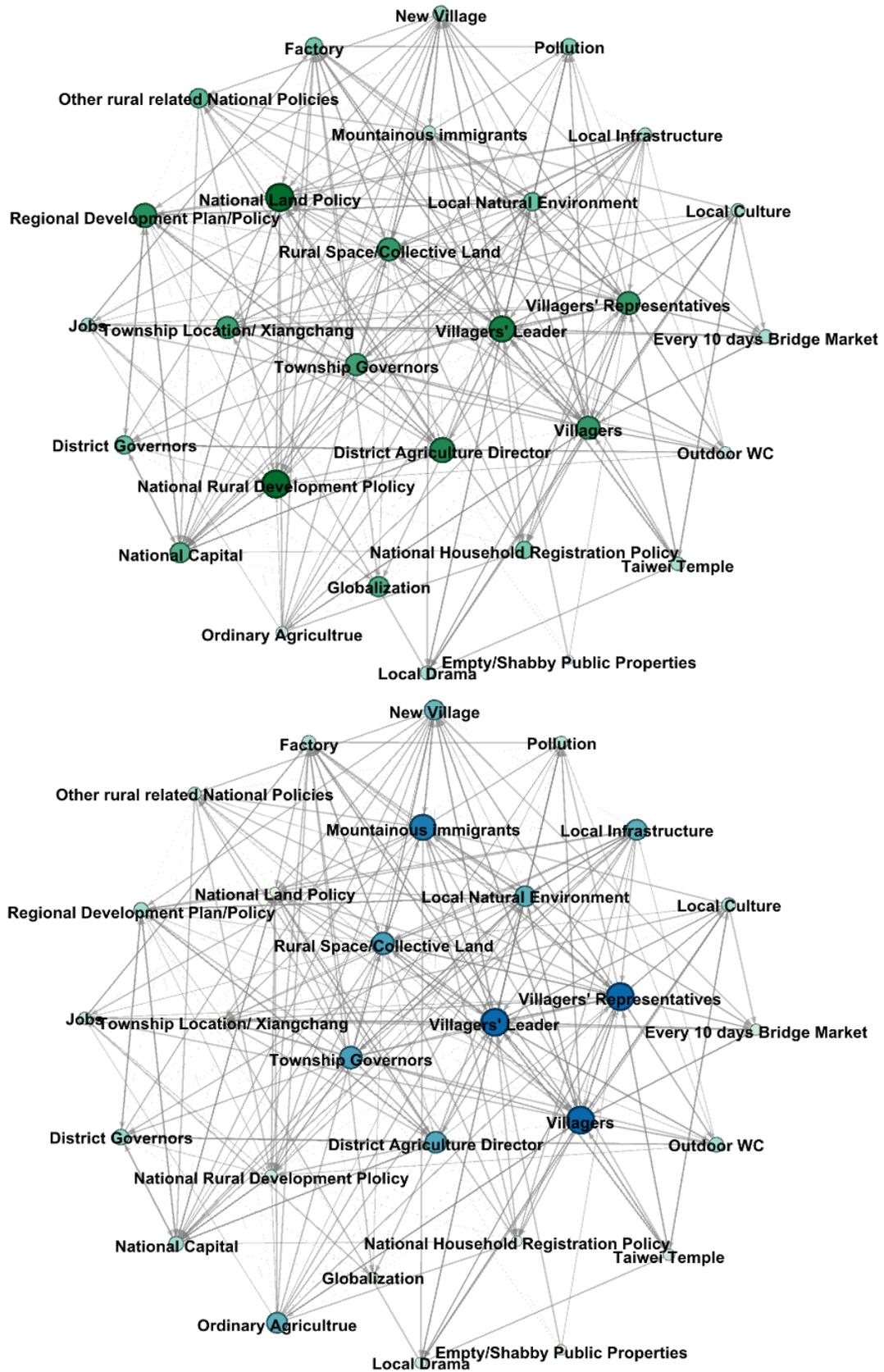


Figure 106 The actor-network before the university engaged practice in Shatan Village: dependence (up) and dominance (bottom)

Source: Author's construction

Before the interventions, the situations in Xianqiao and in Shatan were quite similar [Figure 105, 106]. The crucial actors who determined the level of local development were the villagers, village leaders, and the land; both villages largely relied on national rural development policies and funding. Beyond that, the villages' standard agricultural practices could be understood as an important actor in both networks, though not as strong as the actors listed above.

After the transformation led by Tongji university, the observed actors increased from eighteen to thirty-eight in Xianqiao, while the number increased from twenty-nine to fifty in Shatan. In the case of Xianqiao, traditional agriculture, tourism, the DESIGN Harvests, rural inns, renters, and the local natural environment were added to the assemblage of essential actors that affected local development. In Shatan village, the leading professor, tourism, the township governor, and the collective space were added to the list of critical actors who could influence future development. At the same time, the impact of already crucial actors, including the national rural development policy and national budget expenditures were strengthened in the process. Shatan saw a significant increase in the number of actors involved in the network, while Xianqiao added more critical actors [Figure 107, 108]. The differing trajectories between two villages was mainly the result of the following:

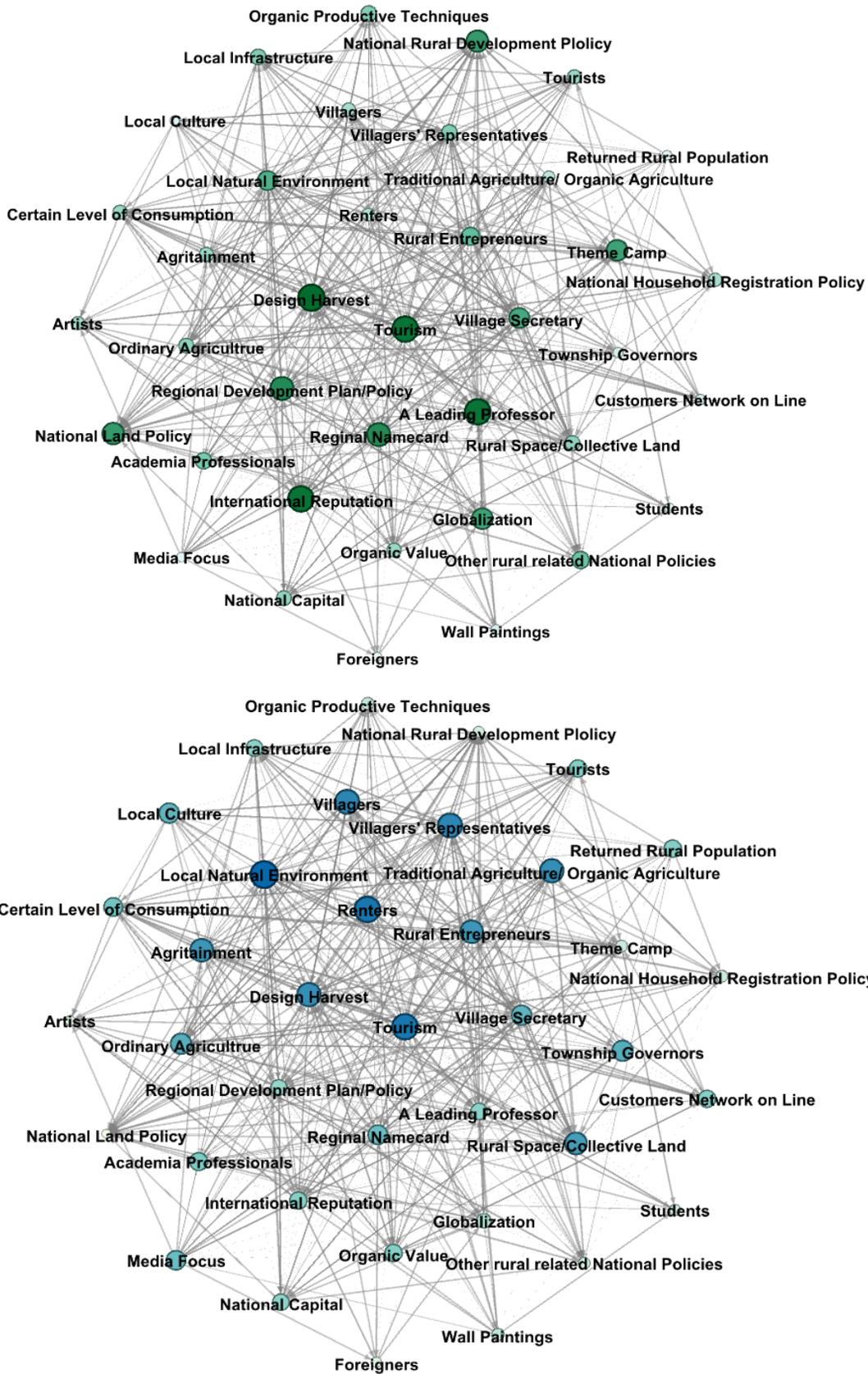


Figure 107 The actor-network after the university engaged practice in Xianqiao Village: dependence (up) and dominance (bottom)  
 Source: Author's construction

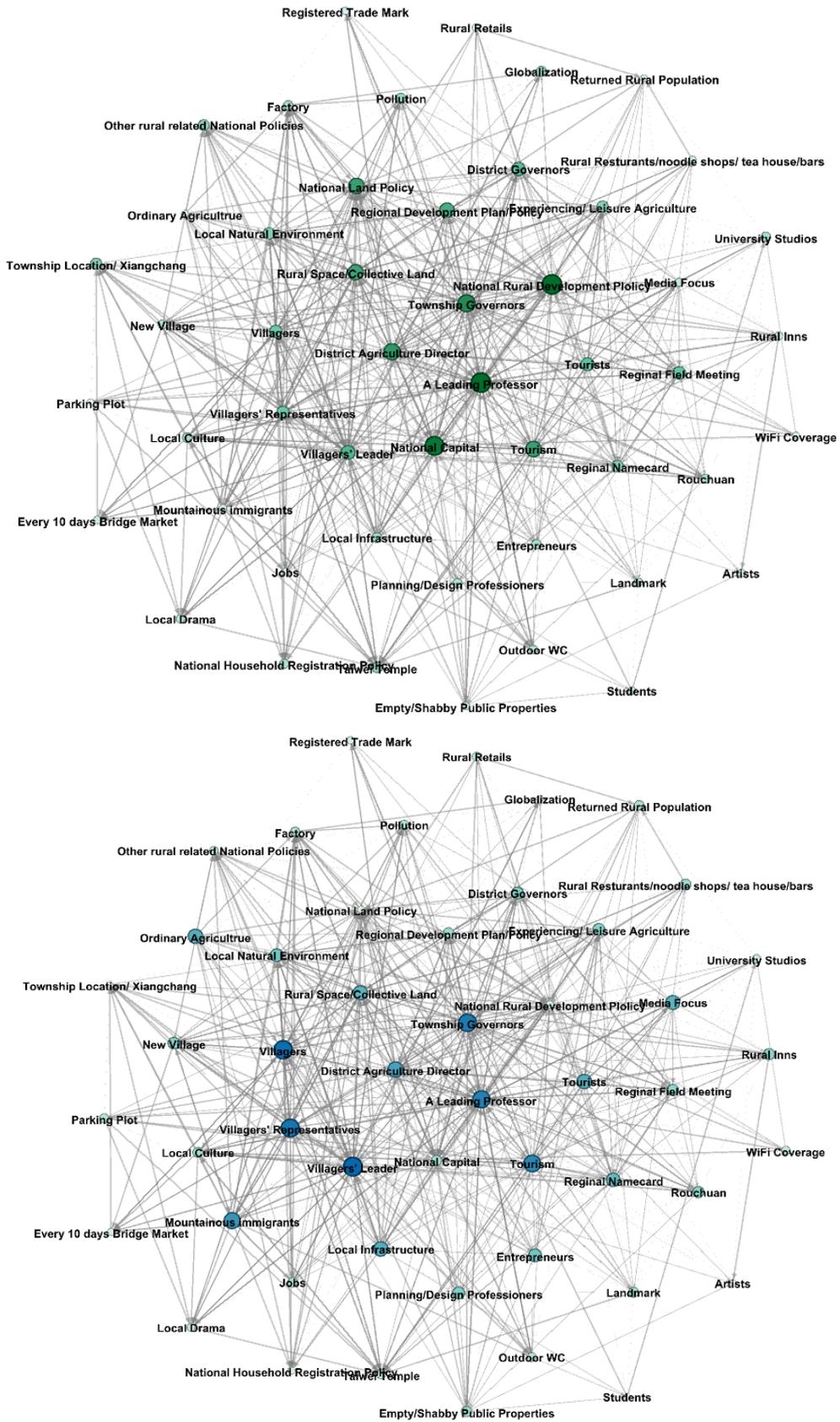


Figure 108 The actor-network after the university engaged practice in Shatan Village: dependence (up) and dominance (bottom)

Source: Author's construction

First, Xianqiao's major funding source stemmed from private investment and was subject to market forces; whereas the investment for Shatan's rural transformation mainly flows out of a specific national investment initiative for rural development. Although the projects implemented in Shatan also target the tourism market, the participants in that market have only contributed indirectly to the transformation of the village, through the intermediary of local authorities.

Second, the differences in the condition of the built environment in Xianqiao and in Shatan cannot and should not be ignored. Xianqiao, though an ordinary village, maintained an above-average level of quality in terms of infrastructure and its natural and built environment. At the time that the university took the lead in its development, its most apparent problem was the need for a revitalization of the village. Although faced with the same task of local revitalization, Shatan's conditions were much more troublesome, and the built environment in much worse condition. In short, the two case studies had very different starting points.

Third, the roles of the villages do not correspond: Though similar in various respects, Xianqiao is a village with little public responsibility for adjacent rural communities, whereas Shatan is an administrative village. This difference would indicate that the engagement and intervention from local authorities would not occur to the same degree and that the requirements in relation to village functions would contrast – realities that would then also be reflected in the networks [Figure 107, 108].

### **7.2.2 The Shifting Flows and Level of Control in the Networks**

Direct and indirect shifts in the flows between actors in the network were observed – there are several aspects worthy of discussion:

First, the status and power of village representatives, especially those leaders with visions for the future of the village, was enhanced in the network. Due to their connections to external development resources and information, as well their significant control over local affairs and resources, the village secretary in Xianqiao and the village leader in Shatan were already significant powerbrokers in their respective villages, even before their transformations. After the village transformations, their power became much stronger as 1) the projects were either implemented on rural collective land (which they controlled) or reused collective-owned properties (which they have the rights to negotiate over); 2) they were involved in the process from the very initial phases, and 3) they had access to information, and were able to respond to the transformations faster than the villagers themselves.

Second, the professors leading the transformation became critical within the network as a connection point and organizational hub for external and internal resources – although with different degrees of control over resources. Beyond that, the professors themselves could also be considered critical resources in both cases, as their reputation and contributions attracted further attention if not direct investment. They had connections to considerable external resources and powerful platforms, which resulted in, to different degrees, concrete benefits for the local rural transformation, and which were vitally important for the initial phase of rural transformation. The villages benefited from the professors' personal resources through the international exhibition on the practices deployed in Xianqiao, and regular academic workshops in Shatan.

The last and the most critical aspect shared by both of the case studies is the changing nature of land rights, which – despite being a fundamental issue – is always ignored. Because of their land rights to the collective land, the villagers remained vital actors in the process of transformation, although the land rights are not comprehensive, insofar as they lack the right to sell the land (but maintain the right to rent and to work it). As land use rights were transferred from the villagers to the renters in the form of the long-term leasing contracts, the most powerful remaining leverage that could bring the villagers to the negotiation table on the subject of rural affairs was weakened. Villages' ability to make choices about the treatment of their land was limited, which resulted in the inclination of most villagers to accept what was being offered, leasing away their land based on the average income generated by conventional agricultural production. The contracts normally run for ten to twenty years, and only a few villagers attempt to raise of the rent based on certain conditions, such as a rate increase every five years. While villagers did approve the projects, and some were happy to lease their land, many still suffer from a lack of income to support themselves, as well as lack of job opportunities. This continuing dilemma leads to the key conclusion that in the process of leasing their land, local villagers were not aware of the potential risks, including their own exclusion from future development.

Based on the comparison between actor-networks before and after the projects, it is not difficult to ascertain the bright side of the shift towards rural development. From the perspective of resilient development and community construction, the substantial increase in the number of actors is absolutely a positive sign. However, it is nonetheless worth observing how power dynamics shifted between actors.

### **7.2.3 Internal and External Connectivity**

As such, there is still one more layer to analyze, namely shifts in the connectivity of the villages internal and external actors. In other words, how did the internal actors and external actors organize before and after the practices?

In both cases, the external actors mainly comprised the various authorities at different levels of government and the policies they issued before the transformation. The external actors interacted closely with a limited number of internal actors, who were almost entirely made up of villagers, in particular, the elected leaders. The situation in Shatan is slightly different, as strong local religious practices also bound the villagers to each other. However, after the transformation, the interrelationships between external and internal actors changed in corresponding fashion.

In the case of Xianqiao, the external actors demonstrated substantial change, and at least three major groups driven by different mechanisms could be observed, including policy-related, market-related, and academia-related actors. The external connectivity shifted from mainly the policy-related type to multiple types, which could theoretically improve the resilience of the local development, while at the same time providing opportunities for changing the passive role of the village in the development process. The internal connections also shifted, as the village secretary became stronger and organized the rest of the internal actors, and as the leasing contracts on the collective land (another crucial actor) also strengthened the internal connectivity within the village.

The types of external actors also shifted, from a single group to multiple groups including political, commercial, and academic actors in Shatan. These external actors were closely associated to different local authorities, mainly the district agriculture officer and township secretary. In terms of the connectivity between the internal actors, the village leader remained a critical node of internal connection. It is worth highlighting that the internal connectivity among the actors also started to display different layers: On the one hand, it was further strengthened by the prospect of future development, while on the other hand, it was diversified through the public activities, which enhanced and enriched daily casual life in locally accepted public places.

To sum up, although it differed between the two case studies, external connectivity became increasingly diversified, while the internal connectivity was further strengthened through the work of the village leaders and the increased expectations of future development opportunities

and social activities. The diversified external connectivity encourages internal connections, while the internal connectivity takes the initiative to meet up with external groups.

### **7.3 The Intrusion of External Values: “Inclusion-Exclusion”**

Both village development projects placed an emphasis on tourism – by way of experiencing designed country life or rural history and culture, respectively – as the new engine of rural transformation. Tourism development through rural transformation became a popular choice for many ordinary villages, as firstly, the development of industry in rural areas is controlled from the national level (out of consideration for the natural environment and food safety), and secondly, profits from regular agricultural production remain low.

However, the development of tourism, as well as of other businesses that depend on it, requires the ability to hold visitors’ interests at their destination. It needs the villages to be attractive to people outside the village, or to be specific to the tastes of urban residents. Furthermore, this attractiveness must be distinctive. One typical attraction, observed in Shatan Village, is an emphasis on real rural experiences, including traditional food, traditional culture, farming, and other outdoor activities – all of which protected the local population and the village from too great an intrusion of values foreign. Another option is to provide experiences in the rural context with high value-adds. Taking the DESIGN Harvests as an example, rural experiences are molded through design and organic agriculture is targeted as a means of adding a certain sense of value, as well as attracting a certain group of people. This set of values is not derived specifically from the rural context but instead is an outgrowth of the increasing demands put upon it by urban dwellers interested in a specific kind of rural experience.

In the actual case studies, both types of tourism contributed substantially to local development and rural transformation, benefiting villagers in both villages. However, the first type was more amenable to local values, while the second kind inherently contains a barrier for entry, insofar as locals need time to digest the added value provided by these new touristic products. That is not to say that the second type is worse than the first, but it bears emphasizing that if the second type of attraction is chosen, the inclusion of the local population requires considerably more effort, comparatively speaking. If the locals cannot perceive the added value as such, and from that, learn to take initiatives, the intrusion of alien values will have begun, resulting in their potential exclusion and “rural gentrification”. For these reasons, the anticipated sustainable development dynamic is often difficult to achieve.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

The traditional understanding of urban areas as the fundamental arena of “capitalist spatiality” (Brenner, 2000) and rural areas as sites of subsidiary resource production, has led to the neglect of rural development and widened the gap between urban and rural. However, from the planetary perspective on urbanization, rural regions can no longer be isolated as a binary counterpoint to the urban. Capitalist urbanization both produces the nature of the space that the rural and the urban share and simultaneously creates the artificial division between the two. Therefore, both urban and rural spaces are rendered through the essential characteristics of collision and the production of conflicts. In this sense, countries in very different regions could experience similar development trajectories and face analogous challenges sooner or later, both visible and invisible.

Rural urbanization in China has experienced many challenges, including a shrinking population, a lack of vitality, shifts in the human-land relationships, a lack of job opportunities, etc., which other countries have also encountered, although in different contexts. In China, rural transformation was characterized in the past by low-end industrialization and planned demolition. This form of the rural development was very problematic, and its negative legacies were visible nationwide. After sounding the alarm, rural development objectives have recently shifted towards the goal of the constructing rural spaces suitable for living and working, which nonetheless maintain the existing nature of the village. However, the road map for this vision remained unclear. Exploratory practices were initiated around 2008, during which Tongji University became a critical actor and led some tremendously influential projects. Xianqiao Village and Shatan Village are two representative examples of the experimental practices led by the University. Based on an analysis of the two case studies, valuable lessons were learnt, current opportunities and risks were analyzed, and prospects for continuing research were recommended.

### **8.1 Lessons Learnt**

The evidence from the cases revealed that agriculture – a fundamental element of the rural – was enhanced through innovative practices. In comparison to previous experiences, the observed rural development practices shifted development goals and provided fresh recognition

of the complexities of urban-rural relationships. These insights coincide with the experiences in Britain that

Throughout the twentieth century, though of reduced significance both in employment terms and from the point of view of its contribution to the national economy, agriculture still remains of social and political importance in rural life, perhaps out of all proportion. It also retains its crucial significance as the shaper of the landscape, visually in its arable or pasture characteristics and its field patterns; with the withdrawal or removal of farming operations the effect on the landscape is far-reaching. Agriculture and rural planning are inseparable (Cherry and Rogers 1996b).

Furthermore, other significant achievements were observed in both cases, including the re-definition of urban-rural relationships, the reconnection of rural networks, the introduction of alternative spatial intervention methods, and the encouragement of local involvement, among other initiatives.

Although both projects led by the university professionals produced some significant successes, critical questions remain – especially in regard to the sustainability of the development initiated by the practices. Neither the long-term professional teams that participated in the transformation on the ground in the villages, nor the experimental market-oriented projects – both of which were directly or indirectly supported through public financing – were sufficient to create a sustainable dynamic for rural revitalization. Instead, the development of a more coherent and local internal development initiative would be both preferable and necessary. Unlike planning practice in metropolitan areas, which produce “space products” for a market in which citizens have the right or ability to choose to buy or not, villagers in rural China do not have that choice and must simply accept what they are offered. Thus, in order to make sustainable development possible, creative methods for the inclusion and encouragement of local actor participation and initiative are needed.

The architect and the town planner contribute more straightforwardly to these producers of space than do painters and sculptors, etc. They are inserted into the process of production and reproduction and consequently into the spatial practice of the capitalist mode of production. To what extent can they break free from these constraints and from instrumental space? That depends on the grassroots democratic movement, that of local communities, unions (when they attend to the question), “users,” construction workers—in

short, on the network of social relations that more or less clearly and intensively targets the quality of space.(Lefebvre 2009, 186,187)

The experimental planning practices are not, from the authors' point of view, at present, enough to construct a complete theoretical system. But they do constitute a crucial resource for policymaking, which often lacks a connection to the experiences gained in real-world practice as different authorities, who may not be aware of the complexities of rural development, nonetheless propose policies or goals according to their own political intentions or imaginations. Since post-rural urbanization is still at a very early stage in China, both systematic on-the-ground research and the collection of previous experiences from abroad are needed. It is also necessary to be aware of the contemporary context in which rural urbanization is embedded, namely 1) the crucial influence of globalization and 2) domestic challenges inherent in the long-term existence of rural Hukou-holders living urban areas and 3) the trend toward increasingly lax rural development policies, which resulted in a large quantity of both public and private capital flooding the market. For these reasons, the key to successful rural development must be a focus on sustainable development approaches, through an active awareness of shifting urban-rural relationships, rural social structures, rural urbanization actors, rural spatial formation processes and the possible intrusion of alien values into rural communities. It is also crucially important for planners and practitioners to identify the lessons learned through the exploratory practices.

#### ■ **Top-Down Policy Approaches to Rural Transformation: Necessities and Limits?**

The urban-rural gap in China has been widened since the RO. Although rural development policies were proposed in the form of Central Document No.1 (the first official document promulgated by the central government every year, wherein it indicates its priorities for the coming year) over the course of fifteen consecutive years, beginning in 2008, and the special funding was allocated accordingly, rural transformation is still listed by the Chinese government as a critical problem.

The two projects, organized by Tongji University, were initiated as the national development strategy began to increasingly focus on rural revitalization. The national budget included direct funding for the Shatan project, within the Beautiful Villages Construction program. Though Xianqiao was not part of this program, national policy and investment have undisputedly contributed to the improvement of local infrastructure and the environment there as well.

The evidence reflected in the case studies indicates that top-down funding and policy structures are essential to successful rural development in at least in three respects: First, by re-connecting the periphery to transportation networks as a means of strengthening local accessibility; second, by optimizing the rural built environment for the improvement of rural quality of life, and so that the physical differences between rural and urban communities can be diminished; and third, by establishing market confidence in order to attract more public attention and private investment.

However, a top-down approach has at least one major limitation: since policy and funding are decided at the top, a generalization of the conditions on the ground is likely to occur. The three goals listed above can be adequately achieved through the long-term engagement of qualified professionals, but top-down policy cannot prevent the villages from dying from within. Both projects emphasized that creating suitable, and sustainable, local connections is crucial for the continued success of rural transformations. In the previous development plan, Xianqiao had only refurbished the streets, installed eco-street lights, and introduced healthy walking trails, and the like. Unfortunately, these upgrades to the local built environment did not spark a dynamic that encouraged further revitalization. Instead, it is the development of tourism and the creation of job opportunities for the locals – all initiated by the “DESIGN Harvests” and other rural cooperations – that ultimately promoted the village’s transformation. The revitalization practices in Shatan combined the two development phases seen in Xianqiao. Its transformation plan improved local quality of life and simultaneously provided opportunities for both local residents and the wider market.

In contrast to the bifurcated urban-rural development of the past, a combination of top-down and bottom-up initiatives is crucial for sustainable rural transformation. On the one hand, top-down policies and the funding they bring with them provide the critical preconditions for the market to become interested in participating in rural transformation. On the other, the physical transformation which these policies encourage is not enough to revitalize shrinking villages, the solutions to which happen to play to the strengths of bottom-up initiatives.

#### ■ **Disagreements Between Various Agendas: Global and National Development Requirements or Local Plans?**

Disagreements between local requirements and regional development agendas were observed in both case studies. However, it is critical to highlight the position of village transformations in a regional – if not even broader – context, since the conflicts between different requirements are not completely irreconcilable. This is in line with Brenner’s argument that the failure of

intervention does not stem from practices initiated with the intentional desire to exclude or from a neglect of the internal context, but that its vision of design is so narrow that it restrains the space and the options therein.

Spatially, there is a danger of circumscribing the site too modestly, and thus of stimulating urbanism only within a bounded 'pocket' or 'pod' of activity that does not interrupt broader systems of market based land use, investment and displacement at larger spatial scales, across multiple sites, places and territories. Operationally, there is a danger of programming the design intervention using an epistemology that is fixated upon consumerism, 'quality of life' and the provision of urban amenities" (Brenner 2016, 125)

Facing the severe challenges of a shrinking population and diminishing resources, rural regions require their re-connection to areas with more resources, vitality, and opportunities for revitalization. The chance of surviving as an isolated community relying exclusively on agriculture is small. The agricultural era's paradigms of self-sufficiency are no longer applicable as the global socio-economic context has changed. Thus, the challenge has shifted toward how to reconnect rural networks to the external networks, while still responding to local needs. The two case studies provide us with successful examples of the identification and connection of indigenous features to regional development agendas, while maintaining the highest level of village engagement possible.

#### ■ **Local Value of Local Resources: Non-Human or Human Resources?**

For a comparatively long time, non-human resources were the main factor in the evaluation of potential development goals – a reality which was further reinforced by capitalist urbanization processes. For urban areas, where human resources are largely integrated, this strategy might be the correct one; but in regard to shrinking regions such as the rural, non-human resources are insufficient for the assessment of development opportunities. In rural areas, human resources become a critical element that can no longer be neglected.

The non-human resources in Xianqiao and Shatan were not sufficiently exceptional to merit a rural revitalization program based on their existence, especially when considering the limitations placed on development by natural resources protection policies. However, the two case studies both prove that non-human resources were important – although not necessarily the determining – actors in the rural development process. Conversely, human resources proved

to be more important. Village leaders, leading professors, local artisans, and villagers were the critical actors who formulated the new development dynamics.

## **8.2 Opportunities and Potential Risks**

The promotion of rural development and the contemporary impetus for rural transformation in China has offered both opportunities and potential risks for rural regions.

### **■ The Establishment of a Unified Land Market Promoted by the Policy-Inclusion or Exclusion?**

Increasingly, the central government has begun to show more confidence and determination in placing the establishment of a unified land market in on the agenda, indicating that the barriers slowing down rural development in terms of collective owned land could be lowered. Though specific items are still in process, private investments are being encouraged and have increased in rural areas in the last few years.

At present, villagers are involved in local development mainly through the avenues of land-lease and agritainment. The land-lease contract, as observed in the villages, is based on the price of regular agricultural products, an amount that is far below the cost of supporting rural livelihoods, while earnings from local agritainment projects that have been in development for decades have largely relied on unstable tourist numbers. Beyond that, land-lease contracts are typically long-term, and only some contain provisions for regular, conditional, rent increases unconnected to the profits from the projects implemented on the land.

Therefore, will the continued insertion of collective land into a unified land-market further undermine the villagers' interests? The potential risk exists, which was to be anticipated.

### **■ Public and Private Capital in Rural Transformation: Revitalization or Demolition?**

Rural urbanization was previously dominated by large-scale planned demolitions, which affected villages located close to the cities as well as those set on the periphery. With the aim of upgrading infrastructure, villages and rural networks were destroyed without much forethought. In recent years, the focus on rural areas has increased, with a distinct trend, stemming from both national investment and the market, of capital flowing towards rural transformation, which are providing enormous opportunities for rural development. Xianqiao and Shatan are two of many villages that have benefited from this kind of capital investment, although other villages were not

as lucky. Though the renewed interest in rural regions makes the physical demolishing of villages much more difficult, it does not make the risks of potential demolition disappear. The allure of substantial national investment is so enticing that it could result in unexpected interventions in rural regions, including uninhibited rural real estate development, rural privatization, and the privatization of national investments, etc. In short, the demolition could take on more masked forms.

### ■ **Urban-Rural Amphibious Population - Settling or Tramping?**

As addressed in the previous chapter, the migrant population living in urban areas with a rural Hukou is part of the fundamental context of rural revitalization. This continues to be one of the problems that rural transformation faces, which must be adequately integrated into rural revitalization plans. Before the quality of urbanization can be improved, the authorities – and the transient population themselves, after years of separation and low social integration – expects the these rural-Hukou holders to be settled. For that reason, both urban and rural development agendas must consider the possibility of settling the transient population.

Current rural transformation strategies provide rural regions with more and more projects, which directly and indirectly result in creating more job opportunities. These activities seem to be in favor of maintaining the rural population in their villages and even attracting a small number of people to move back from urban areas. The case studies in Xianqiao and Shatan both provide some positive evidence for this dynamic. Although job openings are limited at present, they are able to draw back some locals, as well as stimulate villagers' own development initiatives. Furthermore, the interventions within both projects are guided by the concept of local inclusion, so the practices left some space for villagers to share in the benefits of the village's transformation. However, not all rural transformation practices demonstrate a similar level of care. The rural urbanization organized under national policies and special funding, which has strong expectations of rural revitalization, is likelier to result in exclusionary practices that further encourage the tramping of this vulnerable population.

## **8.3 A Sustainability Checklist for Rural Transformations**

This research studied two representative types of rural development practices led by Tongji University – which reflect a trend in rural transformations in contemporary China – and provided substantial empirical evidence for the rural revitalization of Shatan and Xianqiao. Their valuable experiences have influenced the broader region and were reflected in paradigmatic

changes to the working frameworks for rural development. Therefore, this study attempts to further the conversation by proposing a sustainability check chart [Figure 109] based on the empirical evidence and theoretical analysis in regards to three essential sustainability perspectives, namely “Environment, Economy, and Equality” (Wheeler and Beatley 2014a). It would be productive in (self-)assessing the dynamics at play during the rural transformation process (although it does carry certain limitations). For example, applying the checklist, author’s assessment of the two cases studied in this research shows that the emerging development dynamics in both villages have some sustainability problems, such as the lack of long-term job opportunities and fair profit distribution mechanisms in land contracts, but also some advantages, such as low spatial structural intervention and long-time engagement of professionals [Figure 110]. Having such information, professionals and stakeholders among others will have a better image and understanding of sustainable development dynamics when engaging in rural transformation processes, and necessary adjustments (e.g. intervention approaches) can be made accordingly.

■ **Environment**

Non-Polluting

Energy Savings

Renewable Energy

Low Spatial Structural Intervention

Garbage Separation and Recycling

■ **Economy**

Reliance on Agriculture

Traditional Farming

Modernized Organic Farming

Connection to Indigenous Features

The Utility of Local Resources

Long-term Job Opportunities

Short-term Job Opportunities

Public Investment

Outside Private Investment

Local/Village-based Private Investment

Return of the Younger Population from Urban Areas

Long-time Engagement of (Planning) Professionals

Local Initiatives

Maintenance of Local Culture and Values

■ **Equality**

Villager Involvement in Project Decisions

Priority of Local Residents in Employment Decisions

Fair Profit Distribution Mechanisms in Land Contracts

Income Distribution from Collective Properties

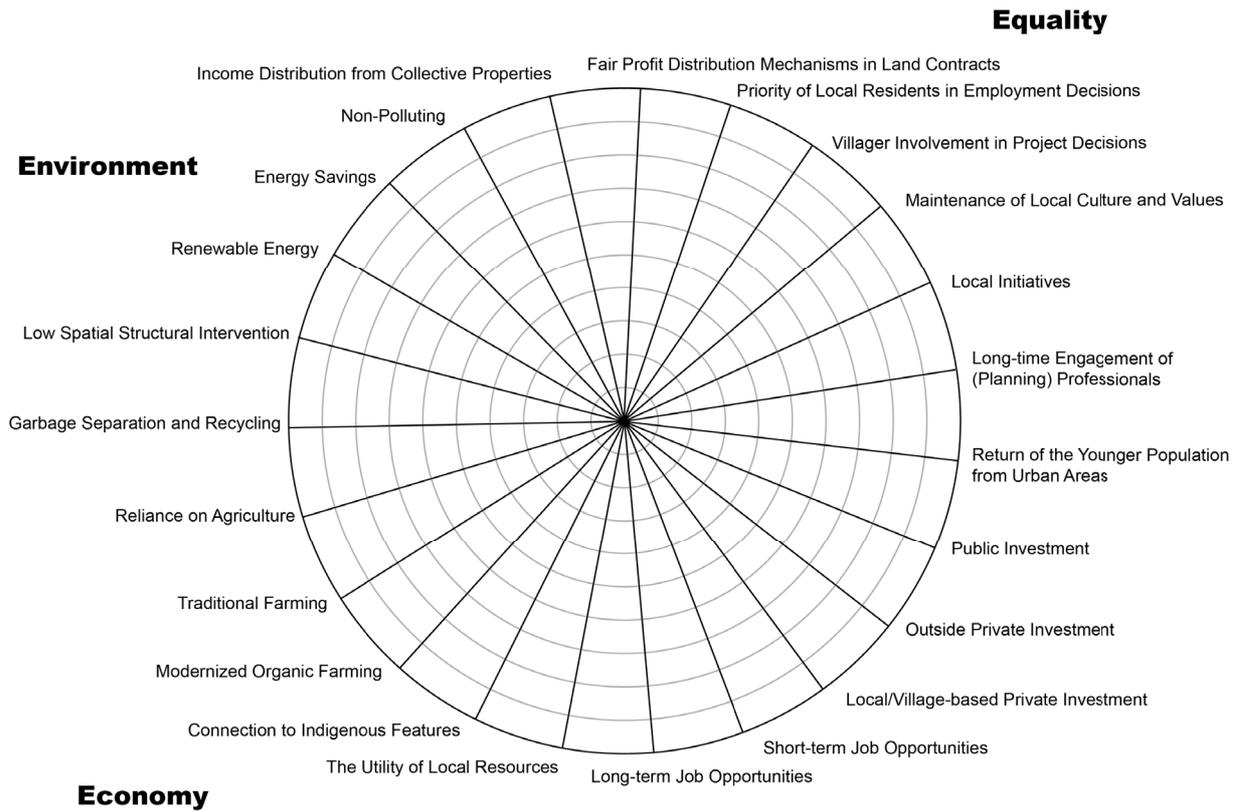


Figure 109 A sustainability check chart for rural transformation

Source: Author's construction

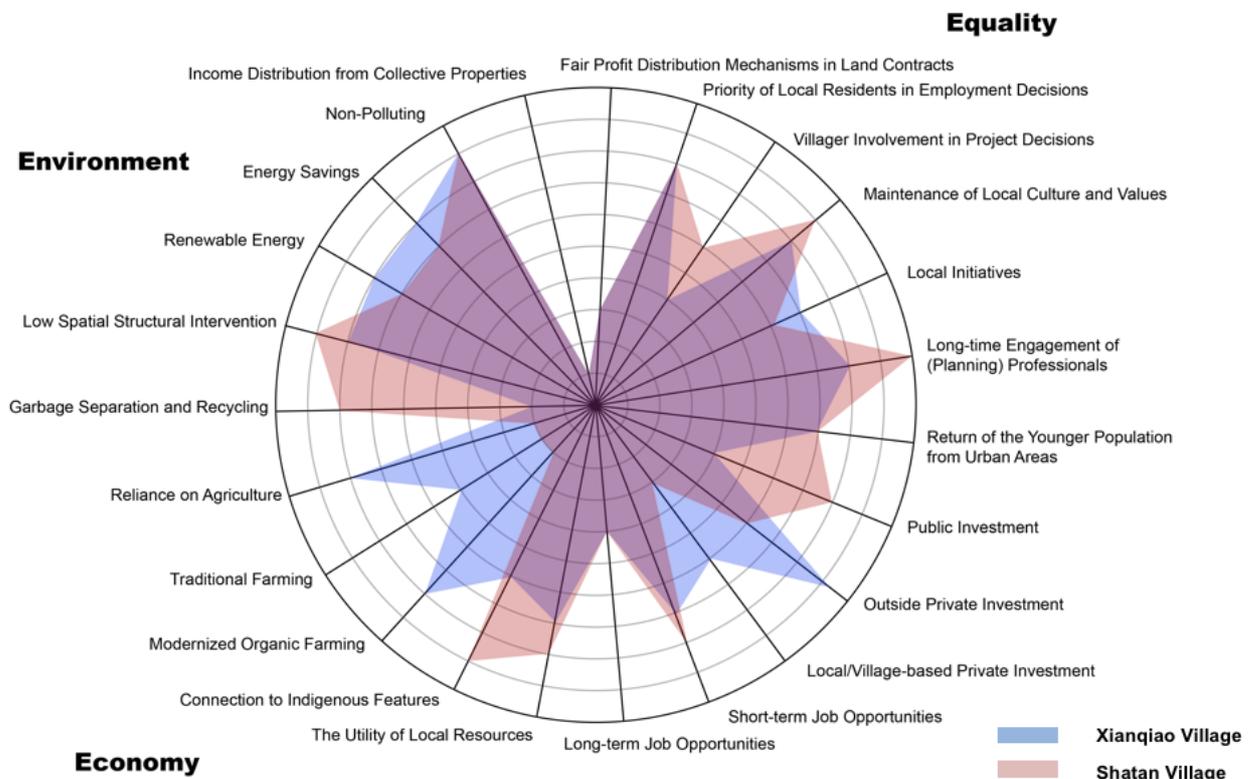


Figure 110 An example of applying the check chart – author's assessment of Xianqiao and Shatan

Source: Author's construction

## **8.4 Major Significance of This Study**

Development dilemmas in rural transformation are not limited to China. Rural areas are no longer places characterized solely by agricultural production, offering long-term jobs for farmers. The economy, residents and stakeholders of these areas have become locally diverse, whereas on a global scale, rural development objectives have been linked with regional cooperations, even international agendas. Meanwhile, the development approach of top-down policy has shown an apparent trend towards its deficiency. Through in-depth analysis of rural transformation through a new actor – a university's engagement in rural China – and reflecting the emerging actor-driven forces in rural development, this research makes a practical and theoretical contribution to the consideration of rural transformation and sustainable development regarding ordinary villages.

At present, development policy and deliveries of public resources based on existing space-scales, as well as administrative hierarchy, environmental and geographic resources are far behind in either recognition and understanding of the role of rural aspects in the urbanization process and current interaction between urban and rural. The efficient promotion of rural transformation, given dynamics in rural development are formed from flattening, rather than vertical, development agendas, fundamentally relies on the initiatives and intelligence of human. By analyzing the complex interactions between actors, whether human or nonhuman and tangible or intangible, the study challenges the normative administrative and development logic with substantial empirical evidence regarding rural transformation. This will inform the policy-making in China, as well as other regions, regarding rural development and that of other places less connected and developed.

By focusing on policy implementation and methods of spatial intervention and their impacts as reflected in every life, this thesis engaged in the comparison and debate between bottom-up and top-down practices and their relationship in rural transformation. By revealing various logic and analyzing the interactions of actors according to actor network theory, the strengths and weaknesses of such approaches were thereby addressed and analyzed, and thus allows a more rigorous understanding of how bottom-up and top-down initiatives affect rural transformation. The resulting practical insights will contribute to rural revitalization within various context encountered, featuring similar dilemmas and struggles between diverse actor-driven forces and (integrated) intervention approaches.

This thesis also contributes to the sustainable development theory concerning rural transformation. By applying this theory in the cases of rural revitalization, one has ascertained the shortcomings and the potential risks of emerging dynamics resulting from exploratory practices. The study thus enriches the theory with regard to rural development by expanding the scope and dimension, as well as developing a foundation for assessing the interactions between essential human factors and non-human actors and proposed a framework for such assessment.

## **8.5 Recommendations for Future Research**

The engagement from Tongji University in the villages has contributed new paradigms of rural urbanization to the global conversation, through the establishment of alternative approaches and the empirical study of case studies. Although only two exploratory practices were studied here in-depth, it was possible to observe the experiences and substantial impact of rural development in Shatan and Xianqiao. On that basis, one can distinguish the fundamental differences between urban and rural planning in the Chinese context, in terms of basic concepts, interventional approaches, operational methods, development priorities, and shifts in actor-networks among others. More importantly, both of the cases influenced rural revitalization practices in other regions through different channels, and their achievements were reflected in more powerful frameworks.

However, the research must not stop at the interpretative phase. The critical problems observed in the exploratory practices are worth further analysis, namely 1) the need for approaches that encourage the creative involvement of potential human actors, 2) efficient improvement of internal and external connections, 3) mechanisms for the fair distribution of benefits, 4) and a consideration of the entire urban-rural policy framework, in order to explicitly avoid both a decrease in development activity and the exclusion of the villagers.

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## Appendix

### List of Interviewees

Date	Place	Interviewees
24.08.2015	Xianqiao Village	A male villager
24.08.2015	Xianqiao Village	A male work staff of the DH
24.08.2015	Xianqiao Village	A female villager representative
12.06.2016	Xianqiao Village	A female villager
12.06.2016	Xianqiao Village	A female staff of the DH
12.06.2016	Xianqiao Village	A relative of a local villager
12.06.2016	Xianqiao Village	A village temporarily worked in the DH farm
18.06.2016	Xianqiao Village	A male work staff of the DH
18.06.2016	Xianqiao Village	A female village representative
03.09.2016	Xianqiao Village	A young male staff of the DH
03.09.2016	Xianqiao Village	The project manager
18.10.2016	Xianqiao Village	A visiting scholar from Tongji University
18.10.2016	Xianqiao Village	A old male villager
05.11.2016	Xianqiao Village	A tourist (A female designer)
05.11.2016	Xianqiao Village	A tourist (An old lady from urban Shanghai)
05.11.2016	Xianqiao Village	A tourist (A boy)
05.11.2016	Xianqiao Village	A student staff
05.11.2016	Xianqiao Village	A mid-aged male tourist
05.11.2016	Xianqiao Village	A villager craftsman
31.03.2018	Xianqiao Village	A female clearer hired by the local rural cooperation
31.03.2018	Xianqiao Village	A young female tourist from Shanghai (with her family)
31.03.2018	Xianqiao Village	A female tourist from Shanghai (with her friends)
01.04.2018	Xianqiao Village	A female clearer hired by the DH
01.04.2018	Xianqiao Village	A female villager
01.04.2018	Xianqiao Village	A female owner of agritainment

01.04.2018	Xianqiao Village	A female villager (with her little son)
31.07.2015	Shatan Village	The leading professor
01.08.2015	Shatan Village	A 19 years old villager worked in a local factory
01.08.2015	Shatan Village	A township staff
01.08.2015	Shatan Village	A core member of the professional team (Male)
01.08.2015	Shatan Village	A Carpenter (Male)
01.08.2015	Shatan Village	A female student who worked on the project for two years
01.08.2015	Shatan Village	An old man lived next to the previous veterinary station
02.08.2015	Shatan Village	A project manager (Male)
03.08.2015	Shatan Village	A very old male villager (A craftsman)
03.08.2015	Shatan Village	A 40 also years old female villager
03.08.2015	Shatan Village	An female villager over 50 years old
03.08.2015	Shatan Village	A 79 years old male villager
04.08.2015	Shatan Village	A male student worked on his master thesis
04.08.2015	Shatan Village	A 65 years old female
04.08.2015	Shatan Village	A female villager
09.11.2015	Shatan Village	A female villager from a neighboring village
11.11.2015	Shatan Village	A owner of agritainment in the village next-door
11.11.2015	Shatan Village	A female villager from a neighboring village
02.03.2016	Shatan Village	A female villager
04.03.2016	Shatan Village	A designer worked in a local planning institute
07.05.2016	Shatan Village	An old female villager
01.06.2016	Shatan Village	A project manager
01.06.2016	Shatan Village	The leading professor
02.06.2016	Shatan Village	An exchange student from Tongji University (Male)
02.06.2016	Shatan Village	An exchange student from Tongji University (Female)
02.06.2016	Shatan Village	A villager from a neighboring village (Female)
02.06.2016	Shatan Village	A female staff of a new design studio
02.06.2016	Shatan Village	A male reporter from a local channel
03.06.2016	Shatan Village	A core member of the professional team (Male Dr.)

03.06.2016	Shatan Village	A very old female villager
03.06.2016	Shatan Village	A male villager
26.07.2016	Shatan Village	A district officer (Male)
26.07.2016	Shatan Village	The village head
27.07.2016	Shatan Village	An old male villager lived in the new village
28.07.2016	Shatan Village	A teacher from local elementary school
02.08.2016	Shatan Village	A designer from local planning institute
26.03.2018	Tongji University	A student who worked on the project for over four years
30.03.2018	Tongji University	A core member of the professional teams (Male)

## List of Group Discussions

<b>Date</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Group of Participants</b>
05.11.2016	Xianqiao Village	Three student staffs in the DH farm
05.11.2016	Xianqiao Village	Tourists from urban Shanghai
31.03.2018	Xianqiao Village	One old male villager and another male villager with his son
01.04.2018	Xianqiao Village	Three female villagers lived close to the DH farm
01.08.2015	Shatan Village	A group of female villagers at different ages
01.08.2015	Shatan Village	Authorities from Yutou Township and Huangyan District
01.08.2015	Shatan Village	Two 40-50 years old male farmer and one 60 years old female farmer
03.08.2015	Shatan Village	Three villagers who were neighbors (female)
04.08.2015	Shatan Village	Villagers lived in the new part of Shatan
02.08.2015	Shatan Village	Students in the professional team
07.05.2016	Shatan Village	Authorities from Huangyan district
26.07.2016	Shatan Village	District officers, two village representatives and professional team members