

## **THE RURAL VILLAGES IN PERIURBAN SUZHOU. BEYOND THE COUNTRYSIDE MODERNIZATION OF CHINA**

**Giulio Verdini**<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Among the top priorities of the political agenda set by the Chinese government during the last years, there is a rising need of achieving a balance between economic growth and environmental protection reducing, among the other things, urban–rural conflicts and building a “new Chinese countryside”.

Especially in coastal China, and in the area of Suzhou that is used as a case study, a strongly land-consuming urbanization model is affecting the residual agricultural areas with a drastic reduction of farmland, causing at the same time a process of decline of a complex system of rural villages still existing around or within the urban areas (Liu et al., 2010; Verdini et al., 2011).

While the task of urban growth containment in China has already been addressed and, given the complexity of the issue, some strategies have been put forward (Zhao et al., 2010), the goal of a “new countryside” is still quite controversial. Behind the willingness of achieving the efficiency of agricultural areas creating meanwhile “clean and tidy villages” and a “civilized social atmosphere”, lies the obsolete ideology of countryside modernization (Long et al., 2010).

The aim of the present paper is to point out the contradictory effects of these actions in the peri-urban belt of Suzhou in Jiangsu Province, reporting the preliminary results of a research work supported by the Suzhou Social Science Foundation in 2011, which is still ongoing. According to the fieldtrips and the first questionnaires realized in the summer and autumn 2011, an articulated and transitional reality becomes apparent. The system of villages studied reveals how most of them are threatened today either directly by the urbanization pressure or indirectly by the application of relocation schemes for local villagers. Moreover, the social structure is facing a problem of gradual expulsion of the young workforce towards the urban areas that will cause a phenomenon of the local population ageing in the medium-long term.

The understanding of the social and economical issues of the system of peri-urban

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Urban Planning and Design, Xi’An Jiaotong – Liverpool University, Suzhou, People’s Republic of China – giulio.verdini@xjtlu.edu.cn

villages can be considered a first and important step for outlining the potentials of these areas setting new policies for a real urban-rural integration of functions between the current model of urbanization of the Asian city and the surrounding rural fringes. The maintaining of a system of rural settlements can be strategic for reducing the social pressure exerted in some central and over-crowded locations of the city, moreover keeping the human-scale and the complexity of social formations of this kind of environment.

From this perspective it seems urgent even for the Asian city to rethink the paradigm of urban growth, reconsidering the role of rural settlements around the city.

### **1. Planning the urban fringe in China**

The studies devoted to the understanding of the governance structure for farmland conversion at the fringe in today's China demonstrate that the system appears land consuming, strongly centralized and relatively complex, despite efforts by the central government to reduce rural areas being converted into urban areas, and to protect farmers' land rights by promulgating new laws and directives (Feizhou Z., Bourguignon C., 2009). The planning system is still mainly based on command-control planning instruments (Pieke F., 2002) and moreover it seldom encourages people's participation in the decision making process without avoiding the widespread and dramatically long-lasting phenomenon of illegal farmland conversion.

In China the quota systems, controlled by the upper levels of (provincial and national) authority, and the featuring of "acquisition with compensation" do not guarantee an equal distribution of advantages and disadvantages of development among farmers but often generate discretionary allocation of land with a strong attribution of power to rural committees unable to ensure transparency to the rural-urban conversion process.

Urban fringes in China, especially in coastal areas, belong to a complex and transitional area between the city and countryside hosting the major contradictions of the so called "countryside modernization". Several rural villages, around the dense urban areas, are still densely inhabited by local villagers or new migrants, living, in some cases, in poor housing conditions. The proximity to the city can guarantee, on the one hand an alternative household income not just depending on agricultural production but, on the other hand, urban demand for underdeveloped areas can be a pre-condition for a relocation scheme supported by local government.

From this perspective the goal of urban growth containment and open space preservation (say farmland protection in some official documents of the Chinese government) seems to be, for example, in open contradiction with the several schemes of relocation, often put in practice by local government as in the case of the city of Suzhou.

In the prevailing literature on urban growth management in Western Countries urban containment policies have for a long time been at the centre of attention. This is due to the widely recognised negative impact of urban growth on farmland reduction, unsustainable urban sprawl, loss of environmental quality and rural landscape transformations (Altermann, 1997; Pendall, 1999).

Nowadays this has apparently emerged as a new concern of the China public agenda of sustainability, producing, among the other things, a huge reform of the national land management law by the end of the '90s with the clear purpose of drastically reducing urban growth.

In spite of this, the conversion from rural to urban land use in the Eastern Coastal Area of China seems to continue unabated due, in particular, to the dangerous combination of a land-consuming economic growth, more evident in areas like the Yangtze River Delta in Jiangsu and the peculiar urban policy structure that encourages local governments in transforming land, often illegally, increasing their revenues from the transaction itself (Lichtenberg E., Ding C, 2006; Huang, 2011).

Considering the current high rate of economic growth of China and the forecast of growing countryside-city migration, this will be clearly one of the most critical side effects of the urbanization process for coastal China.

The future of fringe rural areas lies at the crossing of different but interrelated strategic questions still open: the challenge of urban-rural governance in China inside a centralized land management system; the raising of a still timid local demand for inclusion in the decision-making process, especially in the rural villages or peri-urban settlements around the cities; the still unclear definition of urban-rural integration policies and countryside modernization, today unable to distinguish between underdeveloped areas in the west and more complex transitional rural areas in the urbanized east of the country (Long et al., 2010).

## **2. The system of rural villages in peri-urban Suzhou: recent trends**

The area of Suzhou currently classified as “urban district” is almost 1/5 of the entire prefecture-level city (Fig.1)<sup>2</sup>. In the recent years the districts of Suzhou have concentrated most of the population growth of the entire area. From 2001 to 2008 the districts’ population increased from 2.094.600 to 2.382.100 (+ 13,7%) while the “non agricultural population” rose from 1.170.600 to 1.580.600 (+ 35%). These data register not only a high rate of immigration but also a strong process of internal conversion of land from rural into urban. For example in the case of the recent development of the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), only in this area almost 60.000 farmers’ households, equal to 200/250.000 people have been relocated in a

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<sup>2</sup> The current administrative structure of the prefecture-level city is formed by 5 counties plus 5 urban districts: Xiangcheng District, Suzhou New District, Old City, Suzhou Industrial Park and Wuzhong District, together equal to 1.650 sq.km.

neighborhood called Lotus Village nearby the new industrial areas of the city. In general terms the dramatic reduction of cultivated land from 1996 to 2010 can be estimated around 1/3 of the former agricultural area of the whole region<sup>3</sup>.

If obviously the core of the city has been strongly affected by the urbanization process, an important part of the urban districts, especially at the fringe is still characterized by agricultural activities and by the presence of a complex system of rural villages, functionally integrated in the city of Suzhou but still keeping a strong local identity.



Figure 1. The prefecture-level city of Suzhou: counties and urban districts.

The entire loss of rural villages (Xiang), within the urban districts, is impressive. From 2001 to 2010 the number of villages was reduced from 720 to 213 (-70%), merged in the new urban areas or were simply demolished and are today waiting for a new land use. Just in the SIP area 72 villages have been demolished and today officially there are no longer villages in that area apart from some scattered relicts of rural housing.

<sup>3</sup> The cultivated land in 1996 was equal to 3.300 sq.Km decreasing to 2.216 sq.Km in 2010 (Prefecture-level city).

But while the SIP area is located in a highly urbanized area in the middle of the Suzhou–Shanghai conurbation, the west part of Suzhou is characterized by a different environmental and morphological structure, being close to the natural area of Tai Lake.

According to the current Master Plan of the city of Suzhou approved in 2007, there is an entire green buffer zone, along the lake coastline where several villages are still located. This area is delimited by a clear buffer between the built areas, especially of the Suzhou New District and the lake, statutorily not involved in the new urban development process of West Suzhou.

If the risk of urbanization is relatively low and not comparable with the trend of those areas located along the development corridor Wuxi-Suzhou-Shanghai where it's still easy to find “ghost villages” recently abandoned (Fig. 2), some relocation schemes have been applied or are willing to be applied even along the lake.



Figure 2. The “roofless village” in north of Suzhou Industrial Park. Picture: Qianqiu Li, July 2011.

It would be rather difficult to have a comprehensive picture of the technical or political motivations behind these choices, given the scarcity of information, but the case study of Jinshi Village and its surroundings, close to the lake and belonging to the Suzhou New District, has in the last years surely provoked strong local protests against the relocation (Fig.3).

However, the tourist potential of the area and consequently the real estate development that is taking place require a suitable environment producing, on the one hand, a high competition for land use allocation. Hotels, housing developments for holiday and leisure time, parks and greenery, infrastructures, amusements parks, but also technological parks and new residential areas no longer match the local agricultural landscape and, consequently with the relatively poor living conditions of the rural villages. On the other hand, it is rather clear that several economic activities

still ongoing in the area like local food production, fishery, embroidery, just to mention a few, are particularly in demand by the local tourism economy.



Figure 3. The riots between the police and the villagers during July 2010 in Tong’An Town and the surrounding villages due to a rising dissatisfaction for the compensation policy. Source: Jinan Times, Local Newspaper of Shandong, 18<sup>th</sup> Aug 2010).

Is not the goal of the present paper to evaluate the potential benefits of the residual rural areas in Suzhou for strengthening and diversify other forms of economic activities more embedded in the local development path and more sustainable from the socio-environmental point of view, as this has been explored elsewhere (Wang Y., Verdini G., 2012).

The intention of this paper is to reflect upon the rationale behind the “modernization” of the countryside” prioritizing the social impact of the rural villages’ abandonment and considering whether the maintaining of a system of peri-urban settlements can be strategic for reducing the pressure exerted in some central and over-crowded areas of the city. Moreover it is intended to link the issue of relocation to the topic of population ageing, that will strongly affect China in the next 15-20 years, arguing whether improving or even upgrading the current situation can be considered suitable for the complexity of the existing social formations, keeping the human-scale of the environment and the social networks of local residents.

### 3. The case of Jinshi village: results from 14 in-depth interviews

During the last year a research group of the Department of Urban Planning and Design of XJTU has been involved in several activities aimed at achieving a deep knowledge of the fringe areas of Suzhou and especially of the study case of Jinshi Village under the jurisdiction of Tong’An Town.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The research group is coordinated by Giulio Verdini (PI) and Yiwen Wang (CI) with the support of several year 3 students involved in the undergraduate programme of Civic Design at XJTU. The work is supported by the “Suzhou Social Science Programme 2011” (11-B-08). The

The area where the village is located is one of the cases selected for the high risk of abandonment and relatively high multi-functional value<sup>5</sup>. The village, as most of the similar settlements of the region, developed historically in a linear way along a canal directly connected with Tai Lake (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. The current land use of Jinshi village and a picture of the historic part of the village (Source: Planning Methodology. UPD Dept. XJTU, Year 3 students, Group A Poster, Dec. 2011).

The old part is today semi-abandoned while more recently, in the last two decades, new scattered developments have flourished around the village together with a new commercial area along the main north-south road connection. The population trend shows a strong increase of population till the beginning of the 80s (+ 36,4% between 1964 and 1982) and a gradual decline afterwards (Table 1).

During the 80s the population is almost stable, with a decreasing rate of population equal to - 1,1% and a relatively stable household's size (around 4 members each family). In the last two decades the village has lost more than 10% of population each decade, counting 2.149 inhabitants in 1990, 1.901 in 2000 and almost 1.706 today. In the last ten years the loss of household has been even more critical: from 560 to 484 with a reduction of the household's size up to 3,5 members each.

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research granted is "Assigning open space non-market values as a tool for planning the urban-rural fringe of Suzhou. Moreover the selected study case of Jinshi Village has been the case of the Module "Planning Methodology", during the first semester of the academic year 2011/12, coordinated by the two lecturers, with the involvement of 24 students.

<sup>5</sup> One of the outputs of the first research report presented in November 2011 is the comparative evaluation of the environmental, agrarian, aesthetical and recreational value of a number of rural villages in Suzhou. Jinshi Village has been classified, using a multi-criteria matrix of evaluation among the category of "high risk, high value" (Verdini et alii, 2011).

Table 1. Population and household's size trend from 1964 to 2010

Jinshi Village (population and total amount of households)	1964		1982		1990		2000		2010*	
		1.592	383	2172	541	2149	521	1901	560	1706
Household's size	4,2		4,0		4,1		3,4		3,5	
Trends	\	\	36,4	41,3	-1,1	-3,7	-11,5	7,5	-10,3	-13,6
Source: Suzhou Statistics; <a href="http://www.dfzb.suzhou.gov.cn">www.dfzb.suzhou.gov.cn</a>										
*Estimation (the official data is still not released)										

While during the last year Suzhou, as most of the metropolitan areas of China, has experienced a strong population growth in the urban and peri-urban areas, especially in those urban settlements in rural areas driven by the Township enterprises (The “Zhen” normally addressed in literature as “Town”) Jinshi village has declined both in terms of population and households. According to the series of pilot interviews, conducted at local level, a gradual expulsion of population towards the central locations of the city has been taking place and moreover the village has been also affected by some relocation schemes. The combination of the two processes has left locally an aged population no longer involved in agricultural activities, very often retired or employed in informal jobs. Most of the agricultural land around the village in fact is today rented outside to migrant workers while the young people are almost all employed in the local factories.

In order to have a better understanding of the current socio-economic condition of the village, the results of 14 in-depth semi-open interviews to local households are reported here. The methodology uses is the household survey based on a sample of 14 households randomly selected. The information obtained from those interviewed about their relatives (considering only the people sharing the same house) allows, moreover, the sample to be extended up to 51 people, adopting the logic of the “snowball” survey.

The surveyed household size is 3,7 which is in line with the current situation of the village, and slightly higher than the Suzhou average size of 3,2. Furthermore, the pro-capita income is almost 1.173 RMB/month, in line with the per capita net income of rural residents of the city of Suzhou (1.221 RMB/month)<sup>6</sup>. The average age of the people included in the survey is 40,7 and 13 households have at least one family member older than 50.

<sup>6</sup> Even if some of the people interviewed are currently employed in the secondary sector, most of them are involved in informal or not stable work. This is the reason why the average income that comes out for the survey is far from the average wage of staff and workers at the city level (3.797 RMB/month), regardless of their status of rural or urban residents. Actually the majority of people living in Jinshi Village seem to own an urban *hukou* (residents permit). In general terms the correspondence between the household's size and net per capita income is assumed as a provisional indicator of reliability of the selected sample.

The proportion of the employees by type of industry is as follows: 21% working in primary industry (almost all in fishery due to the proximity to the lake), 41% in secondary and 38% in tertiary (in this case mostly involved in small retail at local level). A number of people, even if formally unemployed, are involved in home-based informal jobs (37 % of the total amount of working force surveyed) like tailoring or embroidery, particularly flourishing in the whole area. Another source of household income is from pensions or rural insurances.

As shown in the table n.2 the total monthly income of the sample comes mainly from formal jobs (77 %) nonetheless with a considerable component coming from informal jobs (almost 11 %). The welfare system accounts for another 11,3% of the disposable income of the local population. Considering only the formal jobs most of the income is produced either by industrial (33,1 %) or tertiary activities (39,5%).

Table 2. Surveyed working force of Jinshi Village (46 people). March 2012.

Employment structure 2012	Surveyed working force		Total monthly income		Income produced in Jinshi Village		Income produced outside Jinshi Village*	
	N.	%	RMB	%	RMB	%	RMB	%
<b>Employed</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>48.350</b>	<b>77,7</b>	<b>16.950</b>	<b>35,1</b>	<b>31400</b>	<b>64,9</b>
Primary	6	21	3.200	5,1	3.200	100,0	0	0
Secondary	12	41	20.600	33,1	7.500	36,4	13100	63,6
Tertiary	11	38	24.550	39,5	6.250	25,5	18300	74,5
<b>Unemployed/informal jobs</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>6.800</b>	<b>10,9</b>	<b>6.800</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Total working force</b>	<b>46</b>		<b>55.150</b>		<b>23.750</b>	<b>43,1</b>	<b>31400</b>	<b>56,9</b>
<b>Retired</b>	<b>5</b>		<b>7.050</b>	<b>11,3</b>	<b>7.050</b>	<b>/</b>	<b>/</b>	<b>/</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>		<b>62.200</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>30.800</b>	<b>49,5</b>	<b>31.400</b>	<b>50,5</b>

Source: Research Report, SSSP 2011 (11-B-08).

\* Income produced outside Jinshi Village refers to the income of commuters who spend from 20 to 60 minutes daily to go to work.

One of the central research questions raised during the fieldtrips is about the level of integration (or self-containment) of the local economy in the surrounding areas or, in other words, the amount of income produced outside or inside the village.

In order to calculate this, the income of local commuters who travel 20 to 60 minutes daily (one way) to go to work has been compared with other workers who are employed locally. Most of the income produced in the factory system comes from the industries located either in Tong'An or Dongzhu Town (63,6%) and this is even more evident in the case of the tertiary activities (74,5%) despite the fact that some of those interviewed run their own shop in Jinshi

Village. This depends on the low profitability of local commerce that pushes the villagers to have other source of income, like in the case of a family owning a small centrally located grocery, who also host on the second floor a Mah-Jong club, (a traditional Chinese game).

In general terms the total income produced outside from formally employed working force is equal to 64,9%. Considering on the other hand the informal component, that is entirely produced internally, the ratio between inside and outside income changes substantially bringing the outside quota to 56,9%. Eventually adding the component coming mainly from pensions the quota reaches 50,5%. In a way the total income is almost equally dependent on inside and outside activities.

#### **4. Some considerations and some preliminary conclusions**

The results of the 14 in-depth interviews demonstrate that the economic life of Jinshi village seems to be functionally integrated with the surrounding productive and economic system, keeping at the same time a certain level of autonomy.

The model of development of the Chinese fringe driven in the last twenty years especially by the township and villages enterprises, has created a scattered development of industrial areas across the countryside especially concentrated in the towns. This model, highly impacting from the environmental point of view, as pointed out in literature, has kept alive a system of pre-industrial settlements that today, even if threatened by some internal (ageing) or external factors (urban development), retain their own identity.

In the case of Jinshi village it means that some local activities like fisheries, to some extent certain residual agricultural activities, and especially home-based embroidery still count in the final household's monthly income (16% in the selected sample). These activities are locally embedded and hardly replicable elsewhere due to contextual factors.

The case of the embroidery is particularly interesting because it is developed all over Suzhou in productive clusters, some of them located in some semi-peripheral areas around the city centre and some of them in smaller clusters in the Tai Lake area along the west fringe of Suzhou, as shown below (Fig. 5).

The physical removal of the villages might mean the disappearance of these alternative sources of income especially for some marginal households. In these families the quota of income coming from embroidery can in fact vary from 15% to 30% of the total household's income. Moreover, it can erase part of the cultural capital of the villages, being difficult to reproduce the same local conditions elsewhere.



Figure 5. The clusters of embroidery in Suzhou (Source: Planning Methodology. Group B Poster, Dec. 2011).

The paradox of relocation can be clearly seen in the extreme case of Mr. Yang who was interviewed the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2012<sup>7</sup>. The family was relocated in 2003 according to the last relocation scheme applied in the village. By that time the husband, who is now 57 years old, was running a family metal workshop located in Jinshi village nearby their home. Nowadays, the household lives in Tong'An Town, the daughter is employed in a local factory such as the daughter's husband while her father became a commuter spending every day 20 minutes by e-bike (almost 8-10 km) to reach his workshop in Jinshi.

The relocation that is normally associated with a sense of displacement, shows in this case a certain lack of planning rationale. If this can reveal just a paradox, that might occur under the application of these kind of schemes today at the fringe of Suzhou, the data provided before show that part of the income locally produced cannot be replaced elsewhere, being locally embedded and moreover representing an important intangible cultural asset, potentially strategic for a more equitable and sustainable local development in the near future.

It was argued that underlying the idea of countryside modernization is an obsolete ideology of clearance of the rural villages, today still associated with poverty and deprivation and definitely in contrast with the image of the new China. It's also clear that a sacrifice for modernization requires the fast transformations of huge portions of land and this is the case of the new Suzhou Industrial Park given the high rate of disappearing of rural villages in the last ten years.

<sup>7</sup> The name is invented. The household got as a compensation two medium sized apartment in Tong'An Town of 90 sq.m. and 60 sq.m. plus 220.000 RMB. During the in-depth interview the husband declared his unsatisfactory due to the economic treatment and for the distance that today stands between his working and living place.



What is under discussion is whether some of the already developed areas of the east, strongly urbanized, have now reached their limit of sustainability given the emerging contradictions that have been pointed out. If this is true, then there is a clear need to introduce a new paradigm for understanding the urbanization growth of the east of China in order to avoid just a mechanical reproduction of the models so far applied.

This might mean reconsidering the role of the scattered villages around the city as a suitable living place for a variety of social formations: from aged households still active in informal jobs and involved in the local community life to households sharing their working and living time between the village and the urban edge of Suzhou. For those situations the relocation of these people to urban areas might mean the cut of some of their cultural and also some of their socio-economic roots, creating in the long term an increasing dependency on the new “urban life style”.

The degree of adaption to the new living environment deserves an ad hoc investigation, especially for those areas which have been inhabited by displaced farmers for a long time, but it seems evident that keeping the same trend can generate problems and, especially for the more fragile social formations, less willingness to readjust to the new environment. So far the problem of ageing has not been clearly pointed out, especially in China, but it is clear that the effects of the “one child policy” applied in the last years will soon become apparent. At that time a deep consideration of the spatial implications of ageing will lead to a rethinking of some of the current policies, and among them the gradual urbanization of the rural villages at the fringe of the Chinese cities, which are still suitable living places for most of the local inhabitants.

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