



THE ROLE OF HERITAGE IN RURAL REGENERATION: THE CHALLENGE AND POTENTIAL FOR RURAL HERITAGE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE AROUND SUZHOU, CHINA

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Abstract

Rural areas have served as a vast reservoir of cultural heritage as rich as that in urban areas. Man-made structures in the countryside, together with their adjacent cultivated land and natural surroundings, have been the long-lasting receptacle of agricultural practice that chronicles the history of mankind. Similarly, heritage tourism has long been associated with urban heritage. Beyond urban areas, however, rural heritage can also be a main source of cultural tourism and bring added socio-economic values to local communities. Particularly, in the last two decades, rural tourism has been seen as a remedy for rural communities to combat the declining agrarian economy and diversify the multi-functional roles of agricultural land. In this trend toward agri-tourism, places of historical interests begin to take an increasingly prominent role in rural regeneration.

This paper aims to identify the issues of rural heritage management in China and explore its potential for rural heritage tourism development. Due to the country's relentless pursuit of economic growth, rural heritage in China is under threat of incremental destruction and gradual dilapidation. The perceived threats toward rural heritage are mainly posed by peri-urbanization expansion, the decline of population and, above all perhaps, the government's recent initiative on rural development, 'Building a New Countryside', due to which traditional countryside houses are either demolished or modernized at the cost of original morphological and architectural character. This research takes a form of a case study on the countryside around Suzhou City in Jiangsu Province. While the city has often been dubbed 'Venice of the East', its rural areas are also characterized by canal-scape and features clusters of vernacular buildings and agricultural structures. The paper examines how rapid urbanization and the government's initiative encroach on arable farming land and threaten the continued existence of rural heritage. Drawn from empirical materials from field survey and interviews, it further illustrates the desertion of tangible heritage assets in the countryside.

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The paper argues that the truly rural ‘heritage’ is the everyday life setting in the countryside that provides local communities with a stage to development eco-tourism in the countryside.

1. Introduction

The diversification of the functional uses of agricultural land has grown in importance since the concept of sustainable development became a matter of concern all over the world. Multi-functionality of agricultural land often refers to the production of other goods, services or values in addition to crop and livestock, such as food security, leisure activities, recreational opportunities and cultural tourism (Daugstad *et al.*, 2006). Arguably, rural tourism has been considered as one of the most effective tool to diversify economic activities and generate additional income for the rural community. It has played an important role in regenerating the declining economy of the countryside as a result of intensive global food trading (Sharpley & Vass, 2006). Certainly, the term rural tourism has been perceived and interpreted in various ways, ranging from generally leisure activities to hands-on farming practice. It is, however, the role of ‘cultural heritage’ in the current trend of rural regeneration in general and tourism development in particular that this paper seeks to examine.

Whereas the focus of rural development initiatives in the 1990s appears to be on agricultural reform and economic growth, the first decade of the 21st century has witnessed a growing interest in the heritage values of rural landscape and the employment of heritage tourism as a key strategy for rural regeneration. The idea of ‘heritage-led rural regeneration’ has received a rising popularity in Western Europe and North America in the recent years (English Heritage, 2008; Lincoln *et al.*, 2010; Mayes *et al.*, 2010). While heritage-led rural regeneration appears to be a new trend and attracts more and more attention in practice, appreciation for the heritage value of agricultural landscape hardly can be seen in China and the recognition of its tourism potential is yet to be developed.

As a result of the country’s relentless pursuit of economy growth, agricultural lands on the urban fringe often bear the brunt of rapid urbanization and are quickly disappearing. Original tranquil rural landscape is under threat of destructive development and irreversible transformation. Part of the aim of this paper is to unlock the heritage value of existing agricultural villages and their characteristic landscape on the fringe of Suzhou. Certainly, the evolution of discourse on rural regeneration in relation to heritage tourism and the recent pioneering initiatives undertaken in the developed countries may afford remedies for the problems of tourism development in China (Y.W. Wang & Verdini, 2011). The examination of the rural planning policies and the current socio-cultural and economic circumstance of deprived rural areas in Suzhou, however, are indispensable for identifying the range of issues before promoting heritage-based approaches towards rural regeneration.

It may be worth noting that the term ‘rural heritage’ employed in this paper refers to the tangible agricultural structures and their surrounding open spaces and, also, the

intangible traditional skills and cultural expressions historically associated with agricultural practice. The tangible built heritage that this research focuses on is the unassuming, low-visibility heritage that is modest in appearance, mundane in function and often, though not always, made up of relics of the relatively recent past and not statutorily protected. A basic position taken by this research is that places like these are of lesser significance so have a greater flexibility in making changes to their physical structures to meet contemporary needs, hence a greater potential to stimulate local economies and promote sustainable tourism with the involvement of local communities. Another assumption of this research is that, compared to impressive architectural monuments and archaeological sites, unassuming agricultural structures and vernacular buildings can better reflect the lives of ordinary people in the past and, therefore, better communicate with people at the present time and facilitate their understanding of the past.

2. External Threats to Rural Heritage in Suzhou

The major threat to rural heritage in Suzhou is mainly posed by the rapid peri-urbanization expansion and the government initiative launched in recent years – Building the New Countryside,

2.1 Urbanisation of Agricultural Land

The main driving forces of peri-urbanization – i.e. the inward migration of low-income labours or the gradual encroachment of green-field development on urban fringe – are essentially situational. Yet this phenomenon has become rather typical of cities in China considering that nearly half of the country's growth in the next quarter century will be in peri-urban areas. This continuing expansion of built up areas consequently results in the incorporation of former rural villages and agricultural land into 'cities'. Whereas the urbanization of agricultural land is clearly observed everywhere in China, it can be argued that it has brought about a catastrophic effect on the existence of rural heritage, particularly, in the regions of Pearl River and Yangtze River Delta.

The two regions currently experience the highest rate of economic growth but, historically, they flourished because of the fertile arable land in the region that had rich natural resource and produced abundant crop. This means that there is a relative wealth of cultural heritage that is closely associated with agricultural practice as well as the unique inland waterway in the regions. The research conducted by Bosselmann *et al* (2010) exemplifies the threat of urbanization towards the cultural landscape of the water villages surrounding Foshan City in the Pearl River Delta. A similar episode of 'countryside urbanization' can now be observed in the Yangtze River Delta, which experienced economic reform about half a decade late than the Pearl River Delta (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Yangtze River Delta generally refers to Shanghai, southern Jiangsu province and northern Zhejiang province of China.

The irreversible transformation of rural landscape brought about by rapid urbanization and industrialization of the countryside in Southern Jiangsu Province, has caused concerns. The depletion of arable land, the disruption of ecological balance and the loss of rural heritage and character too are of great concerns to many scholars (Liu *et al.*, 2010; Verdini & Wang, 2011; Yang & Huang, 2011).

2.2 Rural Policy: Building New Countryside

Another insidious threat to the continued existence of rural heritage is posed by a series of rural planning policies and initiatives that are proposed to accelerate the modernization and development in rural areas. This is best exemplified by the government's recent campaign – Building a New Countryside. The idea of building a “new” countryside is a derivative idea of the overarching and highlighted theme of planning policy – the integration of urban and rural development. The campaign was launched against the backdrop of the widen gap in income and livelihood between the urban and rural population. Long *et al* (2010: 459) summarize the salient features of the government's ‘new countryside’ campaign into five aspects: ‘advanced production, improved livelihood, clean and tidy villages, a civilized social atmosphere and efficient management’.

One point particularly relevant to this research is ‘advanced production’ which is concerned with the optimization of production and circulation of agricultural produce. To optimize the farming system, land consolidation becomes the primary means to resolve rural land-use issues. Many rural villages rent the farming land to contractor if the community committee agrees so. The new problem emerges, however. The employment of land-loss farmers becomes the burning issue.

The other relevant point is to break the traditional stereotype of countryside as poor and dirty and to transform it into 'clean and untidy villages'. While this brings a substantial amount of financial incentives and supports to regenerate rural villages, it also has destructive impacts on the character of rural landscape. The problem stems from, on the one hand, the mistaken belief that rural areas should be 'developed', instead of 'regenerated', into something similar with those in urban areas in order to provide local residents with a reasonable standard of modern amenities.

On the other hand, the problem has to do with the approaches adopted to implement the initiative. Modernization of the countryside is often associated with re-cladding or rebuilding the existing houses (Figure 2). Admittedly, upgrading domestic comfort of existing dwellings should be essential to the initiative. Way too often, however, rural villages and agricultural structures are modernized at the cost of losing the original morphological and architectural character. Instead of adopting modest refurbishment or conservation approaches, radical transformation and destruction of historical structures has become the norm for the 'new' countryside.



Figure 2. Recently refurbished houses and new build in the Suzhou countryside

3. Internal Deterioration of the Suzhou Countryside

Another perceived threat to rural heritage in Suzhou is the demographic decline in the countryside that has directly or indirectly resulted in the dereliction and dilapidation of tangible heritage in rural areas. Despite the fact that the official census is conducted periodically, it is difficult to ascertain the actual number of rural residents and unoccupied houses in any given rural areas. This is mainly because the rigid household registration system set up to prevent unauthorized rural-to-urban migration in the 1960s, has nowadays adversely resulted in an enormous number of 'floating population' – migrants from rural areas living in cities where they are not entitled to enjoy any social welfare but can earn more money to sent back home.

While the actual figure for rural population loss is unclear, it is certain that there is a significant increase in aging population in China's countryside as many other countries in the world. This means that, while a substantial number of historical houses and agricultural structures are left abandoned, a large group of elder people, some of who may master traditional skills and handicrafts, are also left behind in the countryside.

To better understand the current physical and socio-economic conditions of the Suzhou countryside, several field trips, face-to-face questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted during the period from July 2011 to March 2012 for the research project supported by the Suzhou Social Science Programme 2011 (11-B-08) and as part of the undergraduate teaching programme of Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou. With its focus on rural heritage and its tourism development potential, this paper mainly reports some findings on the physical environment of rural villages in Suzhou and addresses partly the social-economic conditions. A more detailed report on the social-economic transformation and its relation with rural land-use conversion is presented in a parallel track of the conference.

During the period between July and October 2011, the research group went on four field surveys across the urban-rural fringe of Suzhou and eight study cases were selected and analyzed (Figure 3). The routes of the fieldtrips mainly crossed the southern part of the prefecture Suzhou, including Suzhou Industrial Park, Suzhou New District, Xiancheng and Wuzhong District and the Kunshan and Wujiang counties (Figure 4). The southern part of Suzhou is relatively less urbanized and industrialized as it is farther away from Shanghai. In addition, this part has a greater natural resource for tourism development because of its close proximity to Tai Lake. For the above reasons, Southern Suzhou was considered strategically important to this research.

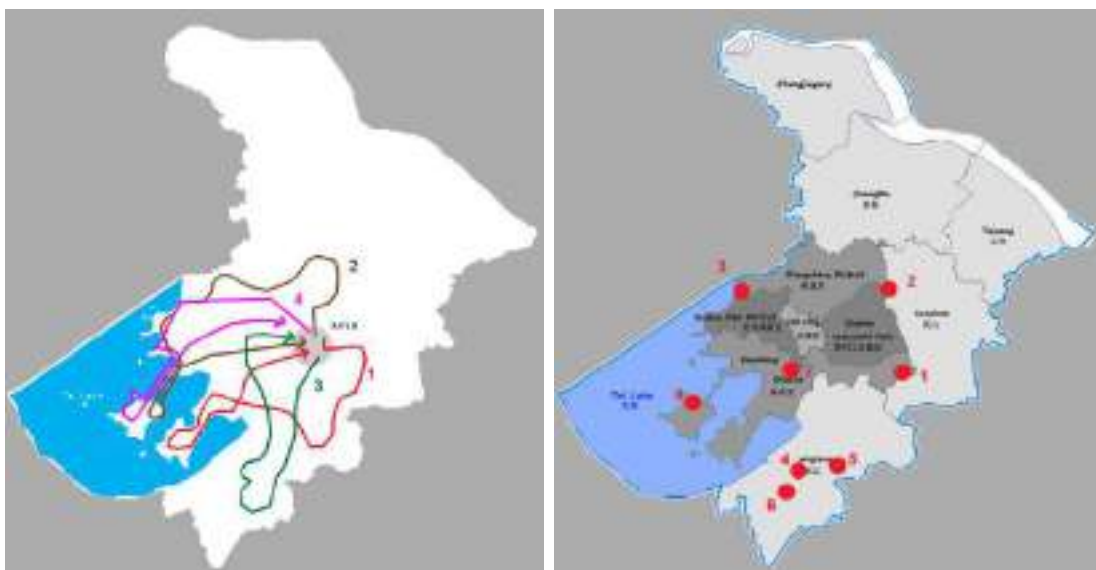


Figure 3. The routes of four field surveys and the locations of eight study cases.

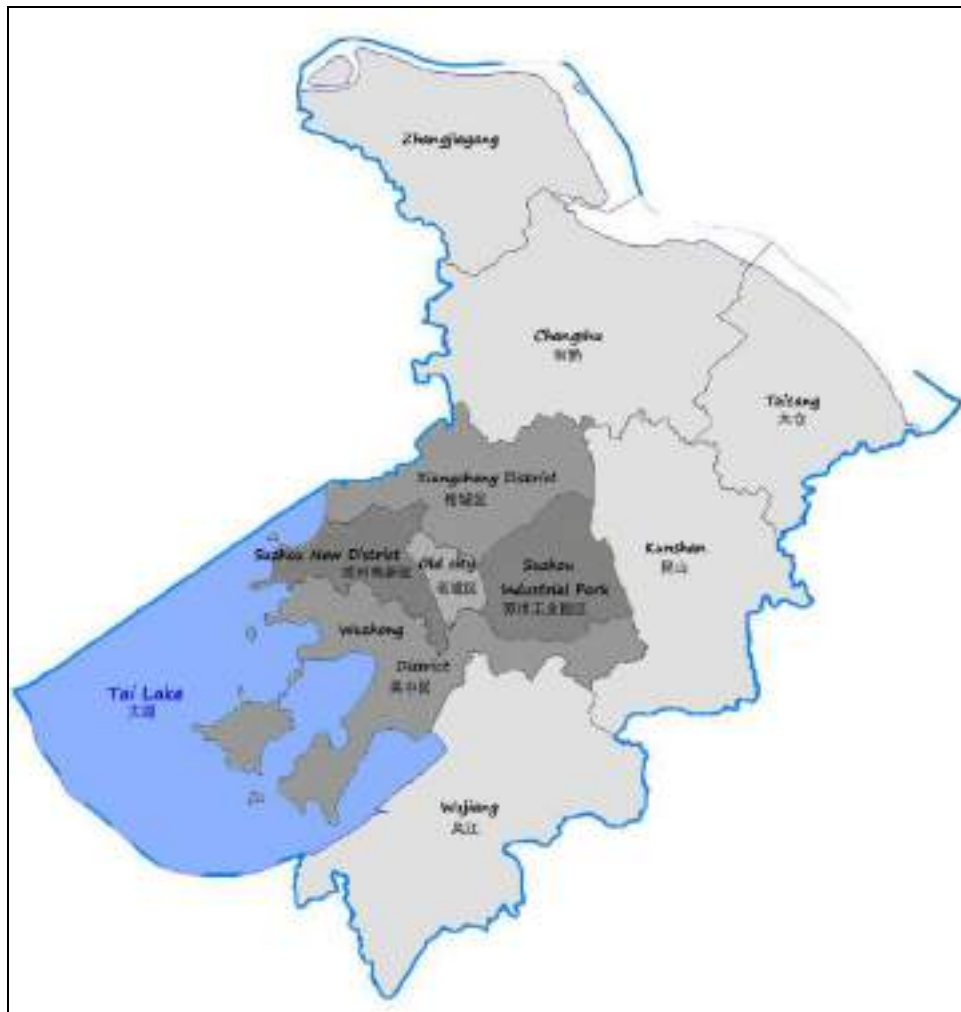


Figure 4. The districts and counties in the prefecture Suzhou

3.1 Desertion of Built Heritage

Many industrial developments were allocated in a disorderly, anarchic fashion in the survey areas. This problem mainly stems from the development of township and village enterprises that the government has promoted and supported since the 1980s. Modern factories were built, sometimes, adjacent to or mixed up with residential buildings and, sometimes, in the middle of farming land or nearby rural villages. In part, because of the phenomenal growth of rural enterprises, yet also because of the decline of agricultural economy and the rise of secondary industry, many old houses in former agricultural villages are abandoned and become derelict.

The survey on the Study Case 3, Jinshi Villages, revealed the degree of abandonment and dereliction in the water villages in Suzhou. Jiinshi Village is a linear settlement

located to the east bank of Tai Lake. The village consists of many clusters of commercial and residential buildings erected in different period of time and lying along a canal connecting to the Lake. The centre of the village features a continuous row of shop houses built in the 19th century (Figure 5). Not having undergone sweeping redevelopment, the village retains much of its original typo-morphological features as well as townscape character.

Currently, there are about 500 households and 1700 people living in the village. Around 35 houses are located in the historical high-street area, one third of which are unoccupied and only one of which retains its original commercial use – as a retail shop selling snacks, processed foods and daily products. Regardless of whether they are occupied or not, most of the houses are in a state of dilapidation, and some are practically inhabitable (Figure 6 & 7). The village did not undergo redevelopment as the residents have been dissatisfied with the compensation policy and refused to sign the agreement. The historic structures in the high-street area are left largely intact mainly because the residents hold the view that the government will resolve the disagreement in compensation costs at some time in the future and developers will bulldoze the area and develop it into a holiday resort or an upscale neighbourhood.



Figure 5. Aerial photo of the historical high street of the Study Case 3, Jinshi Village



Figure 6. Unoccupied shop-houses in the high street (left) and detached house (right).



Figure 7. Dilapidated and abandoned houses in the Jinshi village.

Whereas most of the historical buildings in Jinshi Village cluster together in the centre, the old houses in the Study Case 5, Nankun Village, scatter over the settlement. The Nankun Village is located in the Wujiang County which has been the major production centre of silk industry. The county appears to be extensively industrialized since silk production is a highly profitable enterprise and most of former rural households have turned themselves into entrepreneurs embarking on the new venture. Nankun Village is one of few villages in the county that retain much of the original rural morphology and character because of their remote locations.



Figure 8. Aerial photo of Study Case 5, Nankun Village

Houses in the village sit across the bay and form a crescent shape (Figure 8). With different heights, sizes, styles and locations, the residential structures erected in different periods of time reveal the track of historical development in the village. Short rows of houses form a right angle with the crescent-shape bay. Standing in between the 19th-century houses are the 20th-century structures that, in most cases, were built in the open space of existing old houses to accommodate new members of the extended family. As the new two-storey structures are higher than the one-storey old ones, the view toward the bay is dominated by the new (Figure 9). Although the old houses are being sandwiched by the new and not really noticeable in the bay view, they have a fairly strong presence in people's spatial perception when walking on the access road. All the old houses, however, appear to be unoccupied and used as shed to storage crops or tack firewood (Figure 10). They are left derelict simply because the cost for modernization and refurbishment is high and there is no growing pressure for space as before. Due to the decline of agricultural industry, the younger generations tend to leave the countryside to seek better employment.



Figure 9. View towards the bay (left) and the interlocking arrangement between the old and new houses in the area (right)



Figure 10. Dilapidated and abandoned houses in the Nankun Village.

4. A Possible Stimulus to Rural Economy: Rural Tourism Development

Although the Suzhou countryside is under the renewed threat externally from urbanization and rural policy and, internally, of the economic decline, demographic change and physical deterioration of agricultural villages, the rural Suzhou, with some external stimuli, still holds great potential to rejuvenate itself. It has been argued that one of most effective means of regenerating the countryside is the promotion of rural tourism.

4.1 Rural Tourism Development in China

While the rural farmers still constitute about three quarters of the country's total population, China remains to be the largest agricultural society in the world. It is not surprising that it began to venture into rural tourism development fairly late if compared with other economically advanced countries. However, also due to its

large number of rural population, the country's modernization programme has largely depended on the socio-economic aspects of regeneration (Su, 2011). The highlighted need to alleviate poverty in the countryside has been often linked to the diversification of farming activities as well as the promotion of tourism industry (Zeng & Ryan, 2012). Similarly, on the more ideological level, the connection between rural tourism development and the "Building a new countryside" policy is also accentuated (S. Chen, 2006; Peng & Li, 2008).

Since the early 1990s, the role of rural tourism has taken on an increasingly important role in the social-economic regeneration of China's countryside. Beginning from 1998, the China National Tourism Administration launched a series of initiatives to promote the rural tourism development and assist the 359 exemplary tourist resorts and sites in the countryside nationwide. This shows that the China government, by now, was perfectly aware of the enormous range of cultural and natural resource in its vast countryside and began to direct its focus of attention to exploit these (Su, 2011).

Currently, the international and domestic tourism industries are booming in the three major regions: Pearl River Delta, Yangtze River Delta and Beijing Capital Region. It is suggested that the rapid development of tourism in the three regions has to do with their high economic growth rate and the clustering effect of historic cities in these regions (Zhang *et al.*, 2011). Certainly the tourism boom in the regions is mainly fuelled by the rich cultural heritage in the historic urban cores of these cities. However, for the Pearl River and Yangtze River Delta, it can be argued that the rich cultural heritage in the rural areas is easily comparable to that in the urban areas. Historically, the two regions thrived because of fertile farming land and rich agricultural production. On the account, man-made structures, cultivated land and natural surroundings in the two regions have been the long-lasting receptacle of agricultural practice that chronicles the history of mankind.

4.2 Rural Tourism Resource in Suzhou

Situated in the Yangtze River Delta that enjoys overwhelming superiority in developing rural tourism (J. Chen, 2006; Guoqing Wu, 2008), Suzhou is one of the historic cities that have long-lasting link with traditional agricultural practice. There is a substantial body of literature addressing rural tourism in Capital Beijing and Chendu City in Sichuan Province, but relatively little on Suzhou. (Guo *et al.*, 2008; W. Wang *et al.*, 2009; Su, 2011).

Generally speaking, rural tourism activities in China can be classified into three broad themes: agriculture, folk culture, natural resource and holiday resort (Guo *et al.*, 2008; Peng & Li, 2008). Among the four, agricultural tourism is the most popular one, and it is often known as "*Nong Jia Le*", meaning 'Joy of Farmer Home'. As Su (2011) and Guo *et al.* (2008) note, the joy-of-farmer-home tourism originated in the 1980s when individual farmers tried to generate additional income by providing

authentic countryside cuisine and overnight accommodation in the farmer's home or a place to camp in the farm. In a sense, it was a type of full board and lodging that targeted at customers who were often individual urban residents coming from the cities nearby and liked to spend a weekend away from the hustle and bustle of city life. In other words, the early form of rural tourism in China was an embodiment of 'green' or 'eco' tourism that is completely opposite to mass, one-off, theme-park-like tourism that is currently dominant in the domestic tourism industry. The profit that these individual economic activities could generate was quite modest. It is not surprising that, two decades later, it has turned into a tourism product that is capable of providing lodging and service to masses of tourists at the same time – typically in Labour Day, National Day and Spring Festival holiday. To attract repeat visits and also visitors from other regions and even foreigners, it has also evolved into a comprehensive holiday package encompassing all sorts of leisure activities or hand-on experiences, such as hiking, rowing, fruit-picking, fishing, cooking, knitting, pottering etc. A wide variety of hand-made products or traditional craft works are sold in the theme-park-like farms.

What role does 'heritage' play in the 'joy of farmer home' or, generally, rural tourism? The wide range of activities taking place in the joy-of-farmer-home tourism have involved both natural and cultural heritage. For the latter, it also includes both tangible historical settlements and houses and intangible folk customs and skills. Specifically about the built heritage, they can be the scenery or the scene for the leisure activities in the country side. While the statutory protected 'Heritage' like ancient water towns often serves as the scenery for rural tourism, it is usually the non-statutory protected 'heritage' like farmer's houses or barns provides authentic rural scenes for leisure activities to take place. It is this 'heritage' – in lower case – that has the potential to promote and turn to eco-tourism in the Suzhou countryside, and to stage the 'joy-of-farmer-home' tourism in an authentic rural setting.

5. The Cultural Heritage Assets and Community Involvement

A question has to be asked is whether the existing cultural heritage assets, and the local communities too, can support and sustain responsive rural tourism.

5.1 Cultural Heritage Assets

Mundane and unassuming maybe, farm houses, animal shelters and storage sheds, together with rice paddies, fish ponds, vegetable patches, fruit orchards and canals characterize the rural landscape of Suzhou. As a result of abundant natural resource and fertile fields in the region, Suzhou has an exceptionally rich agricultural heritage that spreads across its rural areas. The mundane rural 'heritage' and agricultural landscape of Suzhou provides picturesque and tranquil settings that are as idyllic as the renowned water towns in the region (Ruan *et al.*, 2002; Zhou & Ma, 2007; Ruan & Yuan, 2011). Rural villages in Suzhou often exhibits a well thought out spatial arrangement, in which man-made built environment seamlessly blends into its

natural surroundings. They can provide places and host events for the ‘joy-of-farmer-home’ tourism in a more authentic fashion (Figure 11 & 12).



Figure 11. View of Study Case 1, Xitang Village



Figure 12. View of Study Case 3, Jinshi Village

The Study Case 2, Chuodunshan Village is an illustrative example that mundane rural ‘heritage’ is capable of staging eco-tourism. Instead of allocating the money from the ‘Building a New Countryside’ project to individual households to renovate private houses, the community committee used the government subsidy to improve the public spaces in the village. The local government consequently chose the village to be the site to pilot an environmentally-friendly water purification system. The overall quality of the public realm was significantly improved, although the spatial

configuration of the village was slightly altered to enhance accessibility and convenience (Figure 13, 14 & 15).



Figure 13. Aerial photos of Study Case 2, Chuodunshan Village, taken before and after the improvement of public realm. The outer service road and the footpath on the south bank of the east-west canal were added.



Figure 14. The public spaces in Chuodunshan Village

Most of the buildings in the villages were rebuilt in the 1980s. Some of them are in fact quite contemporary. In other words, no buildings in the village are of heritage value or ‘historical’ interest. Despite lacking backing from historic buildings, the local restaurant owners make the most of rural setting in the village and run their business in an ingenious way. The restaurant draws customers at some tourist sites or bus stations and attracts them by offering a free cruise along the waterway by motor yacht (Figure 16). Customers do some sightseeing within and around the village when the restaurant is preparing meals. Most of the ingredients used are sourced locally. There is a large tract of land to the southeast of the village, and many small patches in front of houses too, where the local residents grow various kinds of seasonal vegetables or breed livestock. The amount of local produce has not only proved sufficient for the consumption of local residents’ consumption but has also provided the restaurant local ingredients. The restaurant seems to do good business in

the area as many customers also come to the restaurant by private car. The restaurant gives a fascinating example of how to use the picturesque settings and agricultural landscape of rural villages to brand its countryside cuisine.



Figure 15. Canals and footpaths. Many daily activities of local resident, such as cleaning and chopping vegetables and washing up are taking place along the canal.



Figure 16. The restaurant (middle) provides customers a free cruise along the canal and arrive the village by motor yacht. It also sources most of its ingredients locally.

5.2 Community Involvement in Rural Tourism

To promote eco-tourism in the countryside, it is essential to have the rural communities to support and sustain. The policy of ‘Building a New Countryside is a double-edged sword for rural communities. Under the policy, the implementation of land consolidation optimizes agricultural production but many farmers were, in a sense, made redundant. Also under this policy, China’s countryside has gradually transformed from an agriculture-based society into one with a mix of different industries. The promotion of rural tourism is beneficial to a smooth transition from primary industry to the tertiary. Loss-land farmers can take part in the development of rural tourism. Certainly, the existing theme-park-like tourism models also help resolve the he surplus of rural labours. However, as Su (2011) points out, if rural tourism industry is intended to expand its market and move toward high-quality,

personalized services, the government and competent authorities should provide training, finance and marketing support to rural communities. It is also noted that some younger generations of formal rural residents begin to move back to the countryside and start up small-scaled enterprise related to rural tourism development.

On the other hand, the older generations also have an important role to play. Traditional crafts, customs, cuisines and farming techniques, for instance, are the intangible assets that suffer from decline. Much of the traditional handicraft products in Suzhou, such as embroidery and bamboo weaving are produced in rural areas as home-based enterprises. Whereas the term 'rural heritage' denotes an attractive combination of natural and cultural heritage, the term 'cultural heritage' also encompasses both tangible and intangible assets. The importance of intangible rural heritage should be equal to the tangible (Zheng & Zhong, 2004).

6. Conclusion

The paper has examined the external threats to rural heritage posed by the rapid peri-urbanization expansion and the government's 'Building a New Countryside' policy. It also explained the internal factors that caused the desertion of tangible heritage. The current development of rural tourism industries in China was also reviewed to understand the potential of Suzhou for promoting such economic activities. The paper argued that the truly rural heritage that Suzhou has is the everyday life setting in the countryside that provides local communities with a stage to develop responsive and eco-tourism in the countryside. It is this 'heritage' in lower case that better reflects the lives in the past and communicates the present generation. It also has a greater flexibility in making changes and a greater potential to stimulate local economies and promote sustainable tourism with the involvement of local communities.

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