



## Localising the 'Characteristic Town': A Socio-Spatial Framework for Understanding the Everyday Rural Urbanisation of China's Hinterlands

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**Citation:** Lynam A, 2021, Localising the 'Characteristic Town': A Socio-Spatial Framework for Understanding the Everyday Rural Urbanisation of China's Hinterlands. *Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism*, 3(1): 1027. <http://dx.doi.org/10.36922/jcau.v3i1.1027>

### ABSTRACT

The shift towards an urbanised world is generating profound social, economic, and environmental complexities. Agglomerating regions require new understandings to capture the socio-spatial restructuring of this planetary urbanisation. In China, top-down rural urbanisation policies such as the Characteristic Town, or *tese xiaozhen*, address urban-rural polarisation through a 'one-town-one-characteristic-industry' model aiming to generate localised rural economic development. Characteristic Towns have been criticised as only superficially addressing local challenges, imposing tabula-rasa developments that extend urbanisation into rural areas, excluding vulnerable groups. Within the mega-urban Yangtze River Delta corridor, the Smart Moulding Town in Huangyan-Taizhou's hinterland is leading regional industrial upgrading processes, epitomising visions of politicians, planners, and developers. The urban-

*(abstract continued next page)*

**Keywords:** China, planetary urbanisation, urban-rural interface, Characteristic Town, *tese xiaozhen*, the production of space

This article belongs to the *Special Issue: Influential theories and works for contemporary Chinese urban planning and design (1920-2020)*

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rural interface is undergoing a fragmented transition towards industrialisation while villagers adapt their local economies and everyday practices, generating new socio-spatial typologies for dwelling. This inductive research reveals the role of villagers in shaping, and being shaped by, top-down rural urbanisation programs. The multi-scalar theoretical framework is structured around private, collective, and institutional layers of dwelling, interrogated through Lefebvre's spatial production theory. Uncovering hybrid urban-rural qualities and actor networks, the empirical findings illustrate that villagers' micro-scale tactics are deeply embedded in trans-local industrialisation processes, redefining rural identities and defying top-down spatial compartmentalisation by negotiating informality.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Context and relevance

In recent decades, profound social, economic, and environmental complexities have emerged in the shift towards a predominately urbanised world <sup>[1,2]</sup>. City and countryside have become deeply interconnected within ever-expanding and globalising regions that concentrate global population and wealth, rendering age-old categorisations of 'urban' and 'rural' increasingly irrelevant <sup>[1,2]</sup>. Asia is experiencing this urbanisation most dramatically, epitomised by China's urbanisation targets of 80 percent in its recently announced 14<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan <sup>[4]</sup>. While the urban-rural question underpins the majority of China's current policy amid food security concerns, urbanisation remains a top-down tool to drive development <sup>[3,4]</sup>.

A recent policy aimed at addressing the country's historic urban-rural polarisation is the Characteristic Town (CT), each specialising in one core industry to stimulate localised economic development and employment in rural areas <sup>[5,6]</sup>. In the affluent coastal province of Zhejiang, within one of the largest regional conurbations in the world, the Yangtze River Delta (YRD), lies the industrialising hinterland of prefecture-level city Taizhou. Epitomising the CT's top-down rural urbanisation vision, the Smart Moulding Town (SMT) is leading the regional upgrading process of the local moulding industry from Huangyan district's urban-rural interface. The ongoing socio-spatial restructuring of the formerly rural surrounding villages is creating a hybrid and

fragmented landscape of agriculture and industrial production, while villagers adapt their local economies and everyday practices, resulting in new typologies for dwelling.

### 1.2 A multi-scalar approach

Highlighting the social production of space within extended urbanisation processes, urbanist Neil Brenner <sup>[7]</sup> argued that 'multi-scalar methodologies are now absolutely essential for grasping the fundamental role of cities as preconditions, arenas, and outcomes of the current round of global capitalist restructuring.' This study thus applies a multi-dimensional theoretical approach to reveal the interdependent interactions of villagers' micro-scale survival tactics within macro-scale top-down urbanisation programs, taking the SMT and its surrounding villages as a meso-scale case study.

*Macro-scale: Extended urbanisation:* Globally, and particularly in China, the scale and pace of urban expansion is resulting in uneven socio-spatial development <sup>[2,3]</sup>. While the impacts are most exaggerated at urban-rural interfaces, these areas are overlooked in research and the majority of policies still employ a binary approach <sup>[1,2]</sup>. Furthermore, most knowledge production on urbanisation is positioned within globally significant mega cities, while secondary cities do not yet receive adequate critical attention, despite being the primary sites of rapid growth <sup>[8]</sup>. This study therefore contributes to a wider understanding of extended urbanisation in 'ordinary' cities like Taizhou, through new categories of analysis.

*Meso-scale: The Smart Moulding Town:* Many state-promoted policies like the CT only superficially address local sustainability challenges, and simply extend urbanisation into rural areas. Despite promises of urban-rural integration, the SMT embodies a dominance of top-down development approaches, with harmful social and environmental impacts. The surrounding villages are taken as a case study from which to interrogate this typical interaction between top-down policy and bottom-up response in China. In studying these complex transformation dynamics on the ground, the identified socio-spatial practices, actor networks, and hybrid urban-rural qualities reveal potential for more inclusive development instruments.

*Micro-scale: The practice of dwelling:* Interpreting vast agglomerating regions requires an insight into the everyday practices of inhabitants who constantly adapt to and shape regional and global transformation processes [7,9]. Philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre's discussions on everyday life decades ago thus remain instrumental to our understanding of urbanisation as a multi-scalar process of socially produced space [10]. Nevertheless, empirical research on this remains lacking within the extended urbanisation discourse, particularly in China. This inductive study applies a contemporary understanding of Lefebvre's framework for spatial production to interrogate the social, physical, and mental dimensions of the practice of dwelling within top-down rural urbanisation programmes like the SMT.

### 1.3 Research questions

This study addresses the following guiding questions:

- How do everyday dwelling practices of villagers interact with top-down rural urbanisation visions in Huangyan-Taizhou?
- How are these top-down visions embodied by local actors' daily lives and local economies?

- What can be learnt from hybrid uses and spatial typologies generated at the urban-rural interface?

The study is thus structured around three parallel objectives:

- *The practice of dwelling:* to gain an understanding of villagers' lived experiences.
- *The materialisation of housing:* to observe the ways in which they are embodied spatially.
- *Representations of dwelling space:* to analyse top-down visions in relation to lived reality.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Macro scale: Extended urbanisation

Theoretical categories that shaped 20th century urbanism conceptualised the 'urban' as being in opposition to 'non-urban' areas that lay outside its boundaries, distinctly demarcating urban, suburban and rural areas [1]. In the contemporary condition of planetary urbanisation, however, these conventional binaries can no longer be applied. Steered by economic shifts, technological developments, and globalisation of capital, labour and culture, the socio-spatial restructuring of metropolitan areas across the globe has generated 'a distinctive new urban form, the expansive, poly-nucleated, densely networked, information-intensive, and increasingly globalised city region' [2].

Already in 2011, the United Nations identified approximately 500 city-regions with populations over one million, containing a third of the world's total population and the majority of global wealth and innovative capacity [2]. Even larger scales have since been identified in merged metropolitan areas forming mega-city regions with populations starting at 10 million [1]. Epitomised by China since transitioning to a market economy in 1978, the Pearl River Delta (PRD) and YRD, with populations of 60 million and 80 million respectively, represent two of the world's largest regional conurbations [2]. While these agglomerations form a 'generative source of economic development, technological innovation, and cultural creativity' [2], they

simultaneously polarise socio-economic inequalities at multiple scales [Figure 1].



**Figure 1.** Everyday practices along the Yongning River, with Huangyan's urban core in the distance. Source: Photo by the author, October 2019

Theorising the 'urban revolution' decades ago, Lefebvre described a society developing from planetary industrialisation and economic growth, dependent on and absorbing rural areas in a process of domination <sup>[11]</sup>. Today, trans-local networks of production have opened hinterlands up to continuously expanding regional scales, while 'wilderness' areas face degradation due to their increasing connection with globalisation processes <sup>[1,7]</sup>. The rural can no longer be conceived as existing outside the urban: 'A vacation home, a highway and a rural supermarket are all part of the urban tissue' <sup>[11]</sup>. Understanding global socio-spatial transformations therefore requires a re-articulation of idealised and dualistic notions of the urban with new categories of analysis. Both Soja's interpretation of regions as fundamental units of social life <sup>[2]</sup> and Brenner's elaboration on the 'problematic of geographical scale' <sup>[7]</sup> highlight a renewed relevance of Lefebvre's multi-scalar socio-spatial theory for understanding contemporary urbanisation processes shaped by conflictual everyday struggles. The following describes how Lefebvre's theoretical and methodological insights have been deployed to reveal interacting layers of extended urbanisation and dwelling practices in the context of China.

## 2.2 Micro scale: The practice of dwelling

Since the 1960s, sociologists and philosophers such as Henri Lefebvre <sup>[11,12]</sup> and Michel de Certeau <sup>[13]</sup> have employed the lens of Marxist theory to conceptualise the production of space in terms of mundane and repetitive everyday practices, understanding urbanisation as a process made of socially produced space. In his influential work, *The Production of Space* <sup>[12]</sup>, Lefebvre conceptualised the physical, mental, and social dimensions of spatial production through his 'spatial triad':

- *Lived space*: The social sphere. The lived reality of space as experienced by users in their everyday practices. The dominated sphere.
- *Perceived space*: The physical sphere. Concrete and material space as seen, generated and used: 'the most directly observable "layer" of a much more complex urban life – its functional, operational dimension' <sup>[10]</sup>.
- *Conceived space*: The mental sphere. Concepts, ideas, and abstractions of space by scientists, planners, urbanists, and technocrats through language and images.

One type of everyday space relates to the activity of homemaking, i.e., dwelling <sup>[12]</sup>. Produced by heterogeneous social processes that give it meaning, the materiality of dwelling space reveals wider socio-cultural dynamics and locates them in a particular context <sup>[10]</sup>, while also embodying the identity and emotional state of its user <sup>[14]</sup>. Conceptualising dwelling in terms of Lefebvre's spatial triad helps us move beyond the notion of an end-product or noun (habitat), towards a process or verb (to inhabit), through its three interacting dimensions: social (dwelling practices and local rituals); physical (their material reality); and mental (the governing principles; the way constraints are perceived within the social world) <sup>[15,16]</sup>.

Lefebvre's analysis of space addresses the interdependent relationship between micro and macro scales using analytical categories of global (institutional), private (residential), and intermediate (transitional) <sup>[12]</sup>. Bertuzzo similarly employed the levels of

urban planning, neighbourhood, and architecture <sup>[10]</sup>, while Norberg-Schulz defined private refuge, exchange, and institutional forum <sup>[17]</sup>. Thus, three primary dwelling scales have been conceptualised for the purpose of this research [Table 1]:

- *Private dwelling*: The space where the smallest units of practices are played out. The private realm in which an individual develops their identity and nourishes their personal world. A refuge meeting personal needs while offering protection against the intrusion of others.
- *Collective dwelling*: The neighbourhood scale where communal space becomes individualised through everyday appropriations, social networks and reciprocal habituation between neighbours. Despite individual differences, this level enables encounters between people and the exchange of products and ideas.
- *Institutional dwelling*: More structured forms of interaction than collective dwelling, in places where structural constraints, political strategies, and state power can be felt. These forums occur in public and institutionalised spaces that embody societal values, with the aim of social reconciliation.

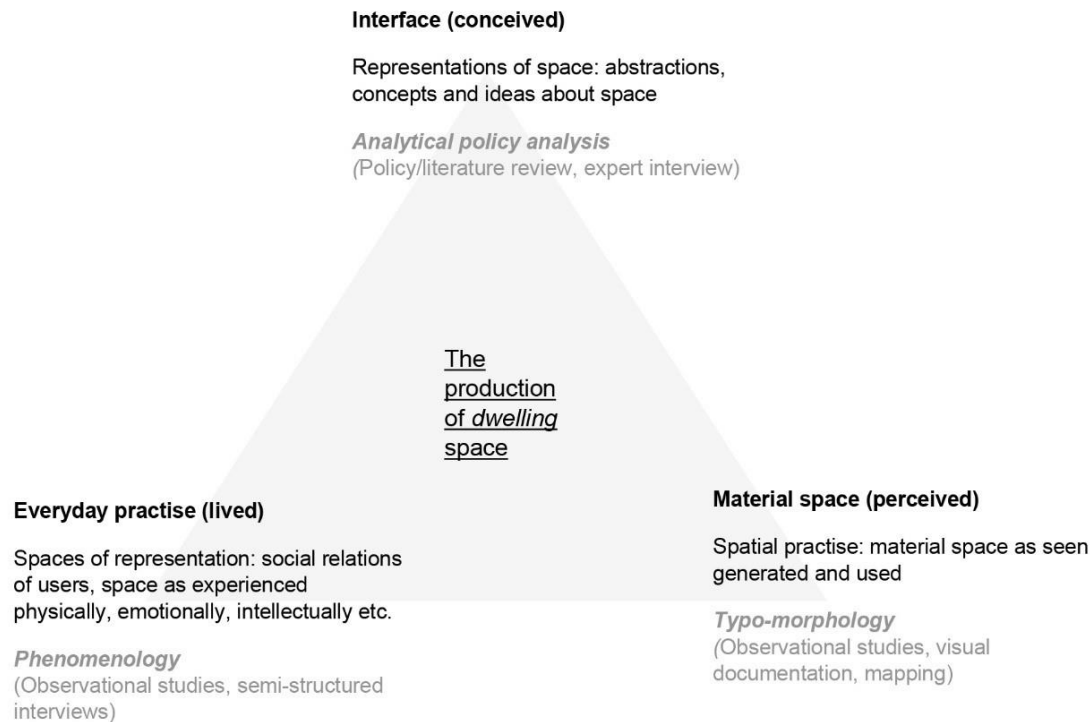
**Table 1.** Interpretive analytical categories to be operationalised in research methodology

Dwelling scale	Private (P)	Collective (C)	Institutional (I)
<b>Material space</b> (perceived)	House	The street, vacant or in between spaces	Institution or public buildings
<b>Everyday practices</b> (lived)	Dressing, drinking, cooking, eating, sleeping, reading, washing, writing, praying, shopping, etc.	As P, with: Social activities, exchanges with friends and neighbours, bottom-up appropriations	Religious or cultural fests, political gathering, public forums, formal workspace
<b>Interface</b> (conceived)	Top-down housing, land acquisition and relocation, personal networking	Formalized spaces, social and cultural norms, restrictions and regulations, appropriation tactics	Publicly provided infrastructure and amenities, social control, information release, structural constraints

### 2.3 Operationalising the analytical categories, relocating theory production

As urbanist Ananya Roy highlighted, 'much of the urban growth of the 21st century is taking place in the developing world, but many of the theories about how cities function remain rooted in the developed world' <sup>[18]</sup>. However, she also asserts that abandoning Western theories and practices is both unproductive and unrealistic. Focusing on the *process* of urbanisation and the role of everyday practices, Lefebvre's theory of spatial production remains an apt critical prism for revealing the transitional and informal conditions that characterise the

Chinese urban-rural interface. Operationalised as an empirical research methodology [Figure 2], it also provides potential for the relocation of theory production to diverse global contexts <sup>[19]</sup>. At each of the above scales, the practice of dwelling has been conceptualised into the three primary components within the spatial triad: *dwelling as an everyday practice* (tactics of resistance, survival, appropriation), *dwelling as a place of state interface* (institutional, top-down power dynamics), and *dwelling as a material space* (physical spaces produced by negotiations between the previous).



**Figure 2.** Applying the spatial triad as a methodological approach

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

#### 3.1 A phenomenological case study

This empirical inquiry employed an in-depth case study approach to interpret the complexities of the urban-rural transformation, allowing theories to emerge [20]. To obtain the necessary qualitative data, the methodology aimed to capture rich, first-hand descriptions of the subjective lived experiences [21] of villagers impacted by the SMT. During a month-long fieldwork investigation, six administrative villages in Huangyan's Xinqian Street sub-district were selected due to their proximity to the SMT development. The target group included the people within these villages with first-hand experience of the studied phenomenon. With accommodation within one of these villages (Xifan), the researcher was fully immersed in the studied context, allowing for daily participant observation.

The study was structured around a three-tiered socio-spatial methodology to capture different dimensions of the case study. Adapting Lefebvre's framework, the methodological triangulation encompassed:

- *Social sphere*: A phenomenological approach to understand lived experiences and everyday practices through semi-structured interviews, with inductive thematic data analysis.
- *Spatial sphere*: A typo-morphological approach to understand material manifestations through observational studies, visual documentation, and mapping, analysed through comparative spatial typologies.
- *Mental sphere*: Policy and literature analysis of top-down visions to analyse the interface with lived realities.

#### 3.2 Social sphere (everyday practices)

*Semi-structured interviews*: Open questions attempted to uncover meanings behind patterns of dwelling practices, perceived constraints and reactive tactics. Respondents' background information was collected, including housing and income situation, family structures, and perceptions of change. A variety of social positionalities was captured in terms of age groups, genders, occupations (e.g., SMT workers, farmers), and backgrounds (e.g., migrants, long-time

locals), as well as the stage of urbanisation (i.e., relocated new rural housing developments, traditional rural housing conditions). A total of fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted. Respondents were approached in informal settings, while participating in everyday activities or inside their homes, and through snowball sampling <sup>[22]</sup> the number expanded through neighbourhood networks. Interviews were conducted with individuals and in small groups, ranging from twenty minutes to over an hour.

*Inductive thematic analysis:* Data analysis was undertaken through an exploratory qualitative approach using thematic content analysis <sup>[23]</sup>. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was considered most appropriate for the detailed interpretation of the villagers' subjective perceptions. Adapted from methods by Smith et al. <sup>[24]</sup> and Giorgi and Giorgi <sup>[21]</sup>, its iterative coding process allows for the systematic identification of emerging themes, concepts, and categories from empirical data:

1. 'Bracketing' the researcher's preconceptions, values, positionality
2. Reading and rereading transcripts and field notes
3. Continuously adding layers of descriptive notes
4. Identifying emerging themes through patterns, key phrases, recurring statements
5. Structuring and clustering themes and sub-themes
6. Searching for hierarchies and connections
7. Generation of summary table to analyse each theme
8. Elaboration of detailed narrative text of the findings, supported by descriptive quotes and extracts from interviews, field notes, and informal conversations

### 3.3 Physical sphere (material space)

*Typo-morphological approach:* The spatial analysis employed a typo-morphological approach to identify typologies expressing a 'socio-physical' understanding of urban space <sup>[25]</sup>. The method begins with a choice of

scales to conduct the analysis, followed by the classification of spatial types by relating one to another to identify shared characteristics. The aim of the spatial investigation was to observe how processes of transformation have been embodied physically in the villages at the three conceptualised dwelling scales: private (housing types), collective (street or vacant appropriated land), and institutional (cultural halls, temples, public spaces). The mapping of material space was carried out through visual documentation (photographic surveys, sketches) to record and analyse uses (economic and social activities, farming practices, spatial appropriation) and the physical environment (spatial arrangements, building types, architectural elements, adaptations, materiality). The resultant analytical drawings were evaluated through the interpretive analytical categories of *material space*, *everyday practice*, and *interface*, allowing hybrid dwelling typologies to be defined.

*Participant observation:* Where possible, the researcher joined the everyday activities of villagers by spending extended periods of time in the spaces within the villages at various times of the day. Extensive field notes documented the researcher's experiences and reflections <sup>[26]</sup>, the context of the interviews, and the physical space in great detail.

### 3.4 Mental sphere (interface)

The problem definition phase involved desktop mapping, site analysis, literature review on the extended urbanisation discourse and Chinese urban-rural dynamics, and policy review of local and national development plans, such as CT policy and the SMT Concept Plan <sup>[27]</sup>. Several conflicts in the implementation of CT policy were highlighted, forming the basis for the empirical investigation: the tabula-rasa approach, local exclusion, and dominance of top-down governance approaches. Data on village collective websites was compared with physical information boards situated within the villages during the fieldwork. The aim was to reveal the top-down representations of space driving rural-urban

transformation and wider historical and political dynamics, and compare their interaction with the lived realities represented by villager interviews.

### 3.5 Ethics statement

The empirical research that this article draws upon was carried out in October 2019 over a one-month period, partly supported by German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) Promos Stipendium and the Urban Rural Assembly (URA) project, funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), while the author was employed at Habitat Unit, Technische Universität Berlin. The article draws on the author's thesis for the MSc. Urban Management program, Technische Universität Berlin, completed in 2020 under the supervision of Dr. Josefine Fokdal and Prof. Dr. Philipp Misselwitz.

There was no risk or harm to individuals or groups posed by the research. The interviews were conducted with consent and collected data was stored securely, limited to the purposes of this research project. Confidentiality and privacy were protected by ensuring anonymity and not using any identifying information. Political and cultural sensitivities were taken into account. Risk of bias was considered and information was cross-checked as much as possible. Real-time and transcript translation for interviews was supported by a Mandarin-speaking URA team member or master student from Tongji University. As well as using translated literature, this may have resulted in a loss of some detailed information. To ensure accuracy and minimal judgment, interviews and field notes were transcribed as quickly as possible.

## 4. BACKGROUND

### 4.1 China's historic urban–rural divide

Following the 1949 establishment of the People's Republic of China, the central government began promoting industrialisation through concentrated investment in urban areas, achieved largely by exploiting rural resources<sup>[29]</sup>. To facilitate this, urban land was converted into state

ownership, while farmland was pooled into large communes<sup>[30]</sup>. In 1958, the hukou system was implemented to control population mobility by strictly dividing public services based on a person's urban or rural status, which became an institutionalised mechanism of exclusion for rural migrants<sup>[29,31]</sup>.

Since the 1978 economic reform, urbanisation policies have become increasingly market-oriented, driven by cheap labour of rural migrants and institutional restructuring which transferred rural resource control to urban municipalities, driving the development of expansive city-regions<sup>[32]</sup>. Investment in industrial centres and loosening hukou policies resulted in major rural-urban migration surges<sup>[29]</sup>. While policies in the 1980s attempted to balance growth by promoting the rural economy, political value for urban development endured, with municipal expansion facilitated by China's dual land system<sup>[32]</sup>. In the early 2000s, land policies became increasingly market-oriented, creating an urban land market in which the transfer of rural land to non-agricultural use must occur through state acquisition<sup>[33]</sup>. The dualistic land system thus consists of state-owned urban land sold for long-term use rights and rural land owned by village collectives<sup>[3]</sup>. At urban-rural interfaces, high demand for scarce urban land inflates values, and with no legal market for rural land, it is purchased by the state from village collectives at very low prices<sup>[3]</sup>. Local governments exploit this by selling urban land rights to developers to expand urban boundaries and capture large profits, displacing existing villages<sup>[30,34]</sup>.

Worsening socio-economic polarisation between urban and rural areas resulted in the development of the 'Three Rural Issues', promoting the industrialisation of agriculture, reduction of farmer poverty<sup>[32]</sup>, and implementation of rural urbanisation policies focused on top-down 'community-building' (i.e., Building a New Socialist Countryside in 2006)<sup>[35]</sup>. Later, the National New-type Urbanisation Plan 2014-2020 envisioned a 'people-oriented' form of urbanisation and



sustainably developed countryside, through long-term urban-rural integration, further hukou loosening, and regenerating villages [Table 2] <sup>[29,36]</sup>. Market forces were harnessed

through preferential policies to 'direct the flows and distribution of [...] production factors like capital, labourers, materials and information' <sup>[29]</sup> to rural areas.

**Table 2.** Comparison of traditional and 'new-type' urbanisation in China. Adapted from <sup>[28,36]</sup>

	<b>Traditional urbanisation</b>	<b>New-type urbanisation</b>
<b>Aim</b>	Quantitative and scale growth	Urban-rural integration
<b>Feature</b>	Rapid and large-scale urban expansion, cheap urbanisation costs	People-oriented, equal public services
<b>Driving forces</b>	Government interventions	Market mechanisms, planning guidance, institutional innovation
<b>Mode</b>	Extensive, large scale factor input	Intensive, improving efficiency and quality
<b>Pattern</b>	Top-down, from central to local government	Bottom-up, governments, enterprises and the people
<b>Urban system</b>	Urban bias, large cities development, regional agglomeration	Coordinated development among, large, medium, small cities and towns

## 4.2 Current conditions at the urban-rural interface

Extensive rural-urban migration as a result of these influential policies has rapidly increased the country's urban population, expected to reach one billion in the coming decades <sup>[3,28]</sup>. The forthcoming 14th Five Year Plan, to be released in March 2021, aims to increase the current urbanisation rate of 60 percent further to 75–80 percent <sup>[4]</sup>. The top-down rural urbanisation programmes have profoundly transformed the Chinese countryside, forming mega-urban regions particularly throughout China's coastal belt <sup>[8,37]</sup>. While these areas remain largely dependent on low-end manufacturing for export, the transition towards an innovation-based service economy has been heavily promoted. China's affluence has been rising steadily in recent years and urban-rural disparities have narrowed to some extent, yet the countryside remains dependent on cities for investment, employment, and technology <sup>[28]</sup>. The multidimensional restructuring has produced 'a vast urban-rural landscape with fragments of agriculture, production (factories) and high-density residential areas' <sup>[31]</sup>.

Rural decline, characterised by environmental degradation, losses of

agricultural land, displacement, and shrinking rural markets, has led young people to migrate toward cities, while a 'left-behind' population of elderly, women, and children struggle to sustain agriculture <sup>[28,32]</sup>. Attracting investment has brought environmental burdens to rural areas, while farmers are left landless after municipal expansion, exacerbating rural poverty <sup>[34]</sup>. Moreover, many state-led village renovations at peripheral areas become entirely replaced by urban-style developments <sup>[32,34]</sup>. 'Urban villages' engulfed by expanding municipal boundaries play a crucial role in providing an informal housing market and local economy for millions of migrants, low paid workers, and landless farmers <sup>[3,8]</sup>. County and township cadres have become strategic actors in these hinterland areas, where grassroots political strategies, personal networking, and bargaining resources play a vital role in informal urbanisation <sup>[37,38]</sup>.

## 4.3 Policy overview

In 2017, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China set out a 'comprehensive rural revitalisation and urban-rural integration development strategy with Chinese characteristics' <sup>[39]</sup>. The CT, or

*tese xiaozhen* (特色小镇) represented a platform for attracting investment to rural areas and optimising the planning of urban agglomerations <sup>[39]</sup>. The 'one-town-one-characteristic-industry' model aims to advance agricultural supply-side reform, cultivate emerging industries, and construct new cities supporting coordinated regional innovation <sup>[5]</sup>. CTs were first introduced in Zhejiang in 2015, and a joint paper by several government bodies later promoted the aim of reaching 1,000 CT developments nationally by 2020 <sup>[40]</sup>. Between 2016 and 2017, 403 CTs have been listed and most of them were in Zhejiang [Figure 3] <sup>[5]</sup>. The National Development and Reform Commission, the state planning agency, has set out CT requirements of a maximum planning area of 3 sqkm and construction area of 1 sqkm, grade 3A scenic location, and RMB 5 billion investment over three years <sup>[5]</sup>. Three overriding aims emerge from CT policy <sup>[5,6,39,40]</sup>.

- *People-oriented urbanisation*: With its aims of poverty alleviation, CTs envision 'specialised communities' that generate employment and improved living standards in rural areas and urban fringes, discouraging migration to cities.
- *Stimulating endogenous development through specialised industry*: Specialising in one core industry, CTs aim for localised development through fostering industrial innovation and economic competitiveness in villages lacking services, infrastructure, and ability to compete in the market.
- *Nurturing tradition and culture by embracing local conditions*: CTs aim to integrate innovative industries and boost leisure and tourism by commodifying local resources and cultural heritage through unique development models, i.e., industry + tourism or culture + characteristic agriculture.



**Figure 3.** Distribution of provincial-level CTs in China, with a high concentration in Zhejiang province. Source: own diagram adapted from <sup>[48]</sup>

CTs take on a variety of functional orientations ranging from tourist attractions to centres of production; from chocolate to drones, and financial services to Chinese opera <sup>[40]</sup>. In the *industry-based* model, the CT has a clear leading industrial cluster

supporting local and regional innovation. The *location-based* model is appropriate for sites with environmental advantages, quality transportation links, and public infrastructure. The *culture-induced* model promotes tourism and regional speciality industries, such as

traditional products, architecture, and customs. In the *government-led* model, the state supports CTs with preferential policies [5].

#### 4.4 The Smart Moulding Town

Huangyan district's SMT was within Zhejiang's first batch of thirty-seven provincial-level CTs [41], located within Xinqian Street sub-district's hinterland and encompassing several existing villages in its planning boundary [Figure 4A]. The industry-based CT agglomerates thirty moulding manufacturing enterprises, including five internationally-renowned 'smart' factories, alongside training centres, research institutes, and incubation centres for SMEs [27,42]. Located within the Huangyan Economic Development Zone and incorporating modern manufacturing technologies, the SMT moulding cluster embodies the area's top-down industrial upgrading towards a national

transformation model area and global innovation base [Figure 4B] [43].

Xinqian Street sub-district had favourable conditions for the SMT's vision of integrating tourism and leisure with industry, with its celebrated cultural heritage, transport links, river network, and proximity to a mountain scenic spot, for example [42]. The SMT is presented as a 'museum' showcasing Huangyan's moulding industry through mould expos, leisure resorts, a mould sculpture theme park and wetland ecological park [42,43]. The plan also envisions integrating production and living by transforming adjacent villages into 'beautiful villages' with agricultural tourism [27,43]. This 'industry + culture + tourism' branding is conveyed by the SMT committee chief: 'For the enterprise, the mould town will be a dream factory; for the makers, the mould town is a venture city; for the residents, the mould characteristic town is a happy community; for tourists, the mould town is a leisure park' [44].



**Figure 4.** (A) Location of the study area at the urban-rural interface of Taizhou's Huangyan district. (B) Xinqian Street sub-district and SMT within Huangyan. Source: images generated using Google Earth



#### 4.5 Reflections on the Characteristic Town approach

During ongoing government evaluations, several CTs have been deemed unsuccessful [45]. As a new policy with a rapid pace of implementation, there has been insufficient time to understand its shortcomings, yet it continues to be reproduced nationally. Implementation conflicts become evident, corresponding with the three policy aims above [5,40,45-48].

- *Dominance of top-down governance:* CTs may bring urban real estate bubbles to rural areas if developers manipulate access CT-allocated land with the justification of building supporting housing. Evading strict land use regulations, investment properties or 'hotel-style' apartments are sold for large profits, while new rural housing is typically based on urban models. The economic benefits of industry come with substantial environmental and social risks, driving land acquisitions at the whim of the municipality.
- *Local exclusion:* Local skills often do not match the feature industry (management experience of village cadres, labour skills of the local population), leading to projects seeking outside talent instead. CTs exacerbate poverty in the long-term if villagers simultaneously lose land and lack the skills to benefit from new industries, while local public services often fail to match the pace of CT development. Industrial concentration, and the neglect of other industries, may have a devastating local impact if CTs fail in the long-term.
- *Tabula-rasa approach:* CTs have been criticised as only superficially addressing local particularities, culture, and resources, instead accelerating urbanisation into rural areas. Despite claims to protect and promote existing natural landscapes and building heritage, homogeneous CT models are often transplanted onto other sites as a brand that attracts investment. While culturally significant places and structures are lost

through this tabula-rasa approach, many new constructions in 'ancient-looking styles' merely commodify local identities to attract tourists rather than improving quality of life for existing residents.

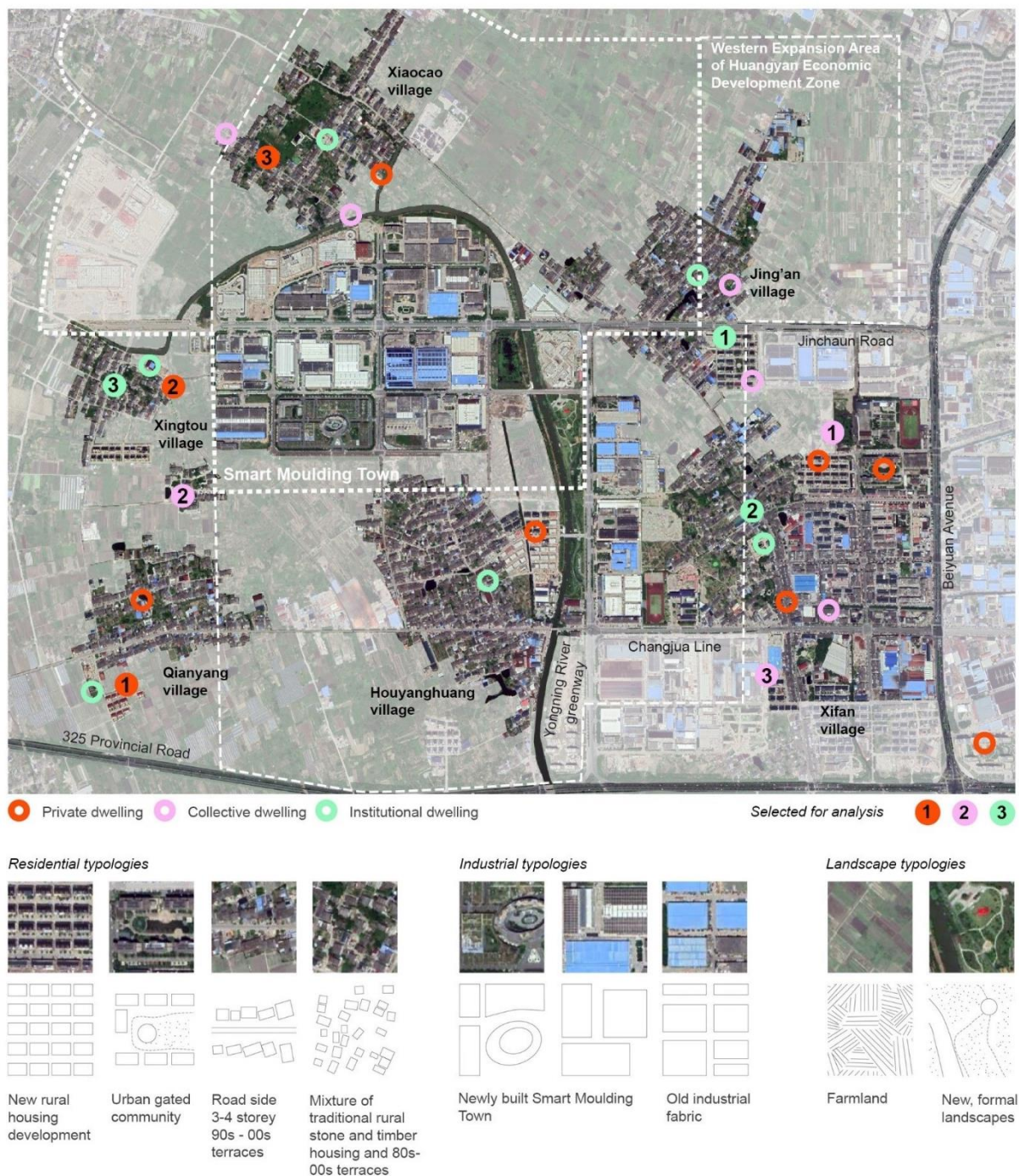
The above challenges can also be identified at the SMT. Huangyan's industrial upgrading project is hindered by a lack of high-skilled local talent, rising costs for wages and raw materials, weak international demand, and domestic competition [43,49]. Increasing industrial land costs are also driving entrepreneurs and smaller-scale enterprises to relocate [43,49]. The SMT site demonstrates disparities characteristic of urban-rural interfaces, such as poor infrastructure and public services, low GDP, and hybrid social values and norms. Despite the promise of local development, many adjacent villages remain neglected and are perceived as a hindrance due to their influence on the SMT's functional layout, while new developments are imposed onto the existing fabric as if it were an empty site [Figure 5]. This vision of the SMT arriving onto supposedly uninhabited fields is clearly illustrated in CGI images of the scheme presented in the local media (e.g. [28]).

#### 5. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The fieldwork entailed a screening of six administrative villages adjacent to the SMT, enabling a comparative analysis of their varying stages of transformation. Dwelling practices were identified and catalogued at



**Figure 5.** Interface between the SMT and the adjacent villages. Source: Photos by the author, October 2019



**Figure 6.** Mapping identified dwelling practices and characteristic typomorphological features in the study area. Source: diagram generated using Google Earth

private, collective, and institutional scale [Figure 6]. This section presents a sample of one resultant dwelling typology at each scale.

### 5.1 Private dwelling: the multifunctional 90s shophouse, Xiaocao village

#### (1) Actor

50-55-year-old shopkeeper living with her husband and adult son. She contributes to the

informal moulding production line by packaging plastic products in her shophouse.

#### (2) Material space

On one of the village's primary streets, the woman's three-storey house was typical of 90s rural housing developments. Two houses had been combined, and she mentioned several times the economic flexibility of extra living space. The cluttered ground floor had



been converted into a multifunctional shop and workspace. The shop shelves were stacked with household goods like cooking oil, dried noodles, and drinks. A large sack on a desk next to the entrance was full of plastic pieces, some packaged into small plastic bags in a basket on the floor. Towards the back were a kitchen and dining area, and long garage which used to be rented out as a mahjong hall, now covered in dust and household objects. A corner staircase in the centre of the house led to the family bedrooms and living rooms on the two upper floors.

### (3) Everyday practice

The woman highlighted the strong informal economy in the village related to the moulding and textile industry. The repurposed ground floor of her own private dwelling became both a neighbourhood commercial space and informal workshop linked to moulding production lines. Despite already having a high family income, a household business was considered vital. While she now lacks space for vegetable growing, she was unattached to her rural background and the lifestyle shift did not concern her. She consistently mentioned her value of social networks, but her busy work-life balance left her no time to use formal social infrastructure, such as the cultural hall. Instead, the shop allowed her private space to become a public living room for her neighbours. The woman was unconcerned about the potential impact of the SMT on established social dynamics, believing that neighbours would be relocated together.

### (4) Interface

The woman perceived the SMT had a positive impact on the village economy, providing direct and indirect sources of employment. Her son worked in an enterprise within the SMT, and she claimed her family's income is significantly higher than the neighbourhood average. The family typifies the rapid livelihood shifts in the area: their agricultural land was bought by the government for an amount the woman considered low, however they benefit from monthly compensation payments and social welfare support. Despite

her village being within the SMT planning boundary, she was unaware of relocation plans. Formal land use regulations were considered flexible and not perceived as a barrier. The woman complained of a lack of commercial activities in the village, thus cars are often used by villagers to shop and work in other areas, including the SMT.

The above analysis of this private dwelling typology is illustrated in Figures 7 and 8.

## 5.2 Collective dwelling: the grandmother's playground, Xingtou village

### (1) Actor

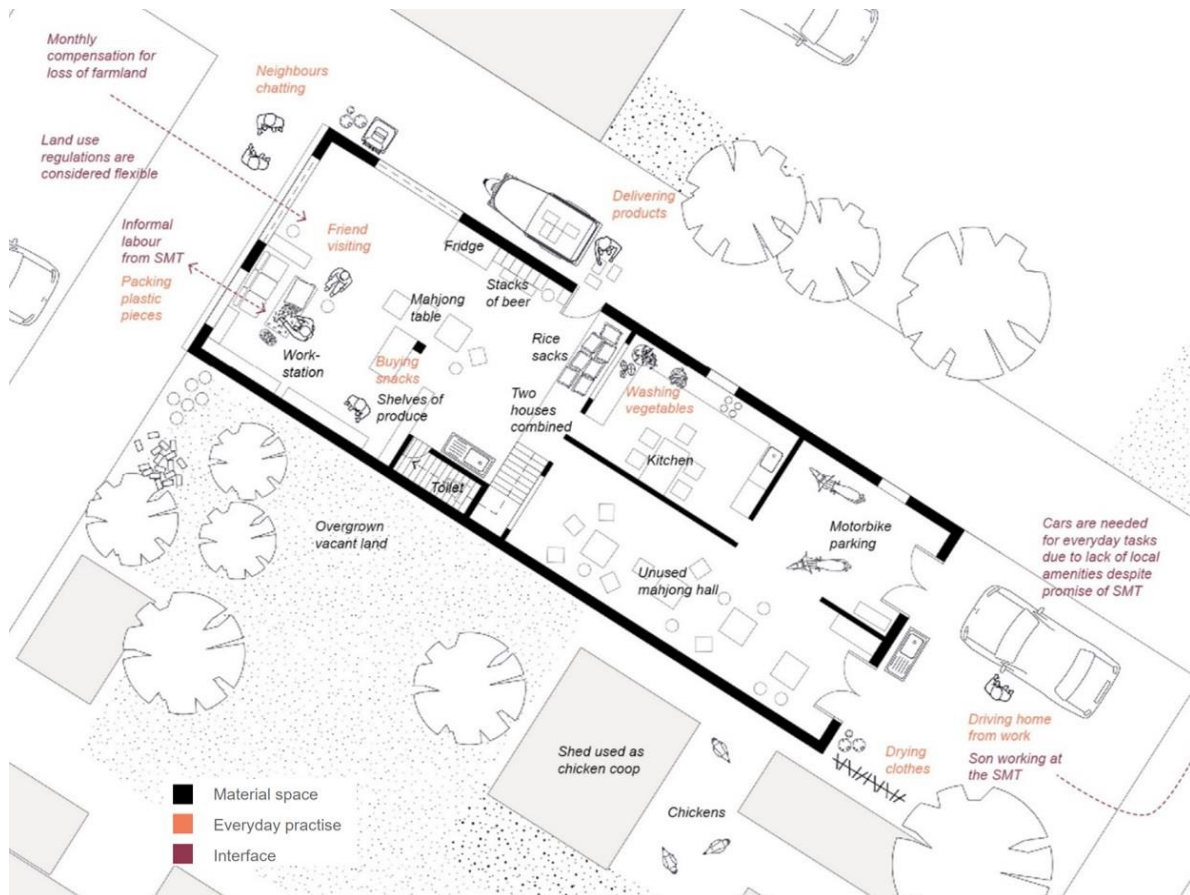
60-65-year-old grandmother who built a playground for her one-year-old grandson. During working hours, she looks after him and her elderly parents at their house.

### (2) Material space

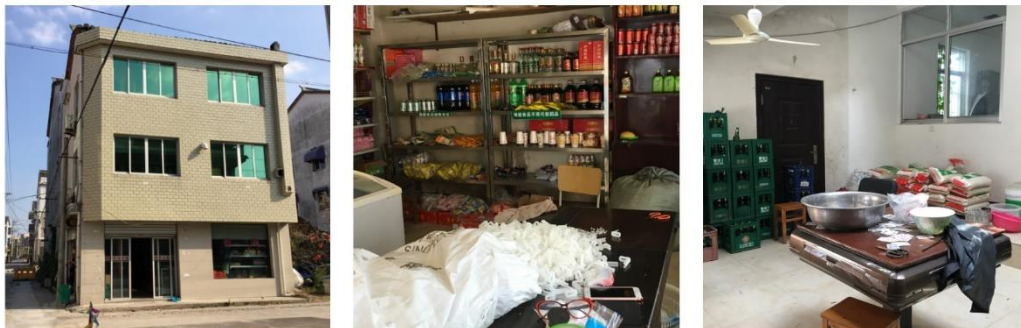
To the south of Xingtou village, a quiet smaller neighbourhood was connected by a path through farmland, directly adjacent to the SMT site. The woman's small playground stood at the corner of a primary street, consisting of a colourful swing, seesaw, climbing frame, and long bench. It had been built in the concrete open space in front of the woman's parent's house, an ornate stone two-storey traditional building with a steep pitched roof. The house had a shaded porch with decorative balustrade and column details, overlooking the playground. Other neighbouring houses used this space for car parking, storing farming tools, or drying rice in the sun. A short distance from the house was walled pond, a piece of overgrown land with orange trees, and another from which wild rice had been harvested.

### (3) Everyday practice

The woman was a carer in the inter-generational family unit, divided in terms of their rural and urban lifestyles. Though she also owned a house in the village, she moved in with her elderly parents to help them with cooking and cleaning. The woman's son lived with his family in Huangyan's urban area and worked in Jiaojiang district. His appearance



**Figure 7.** Socio-spatial analysis of the multi-functional 90s shophouse. Source: Drawing by the author



**Figure 8.** Left to right: 90s rural housing typology; interior of shop with plastic packaging workstation; living room converted to shop storage space and an unused mahjong hall. Source: Photo by the author, October 2019

suggested he had an office job. Due to their busy work-life balance, each morning the woman's son or daughter-in-law drops their son off at the house in the village, and returns to collect him at the end of the working day. Thus, despite the generational lifestyle shift, they remain closely engaged with the family unit and rural area. The woman's playground sat at an axis crossed by many different people – families from neighbouring houses, farmers returning from fields, neighbours washing clothes in the pond, factory workers

returning from work at the SMT – and had become a focal meeting point in the neighbourhood for women and children.

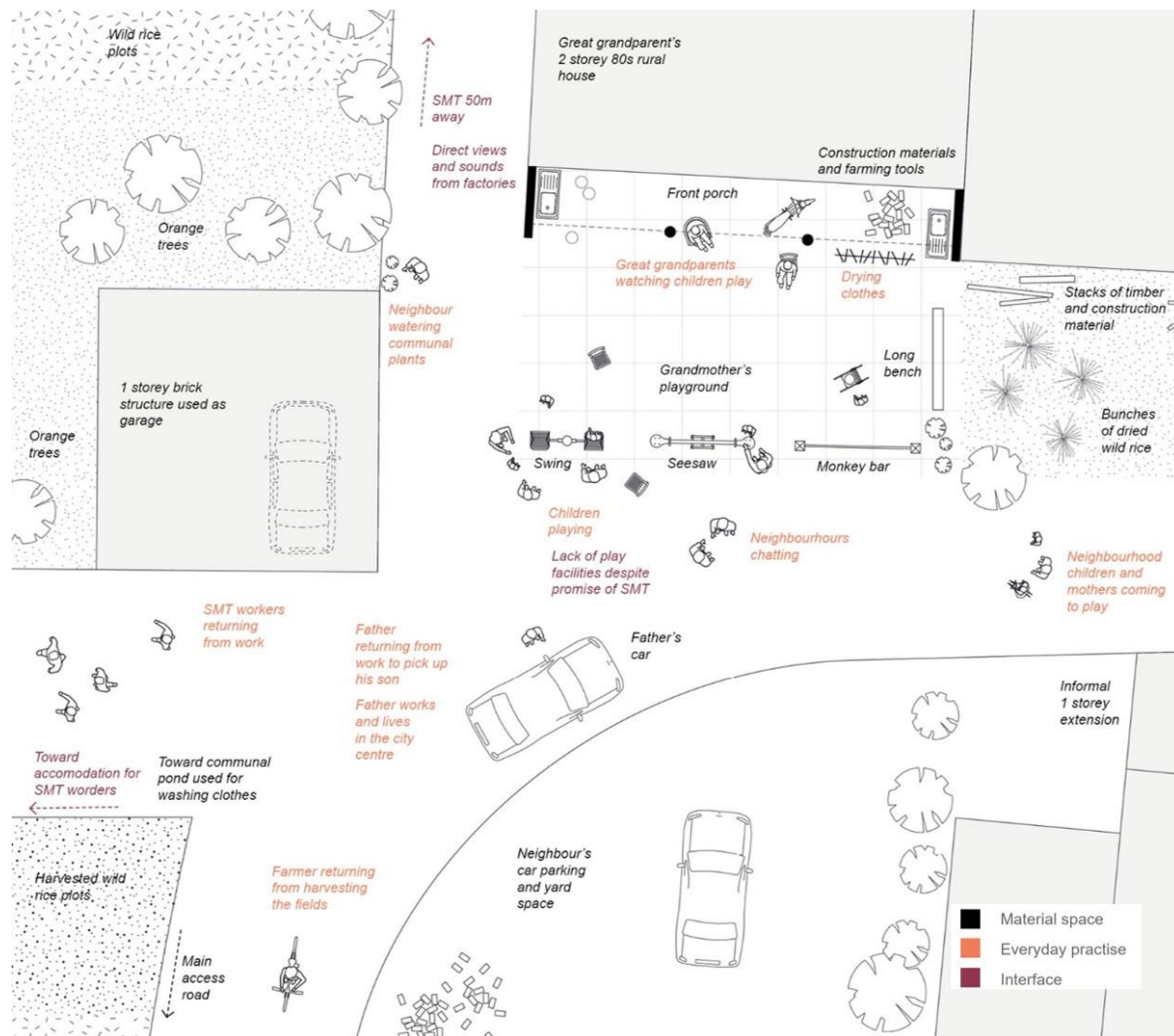
#### (4) Interface

At its closest point, the SMT was just 50 m from the neighbourhood. There were direct views to various moulding enterprises, whose noise could also be heard across the fields. The moulding workers' presence in the village suggested the new demographic the SMT is bringing into the area. Despite the nearby new rural housing development for

villagers relocated by the SMT development, characterised by formal architecture and dense spatial layouts, the woman was unaware of the development plans and appeared unthreatened by the immediate encroachment of industry. Her main concern was the lack of public open space or play facilities in the area, despite the SMT's

promise of offering such amenities. Using her own resources, the woman's re-purposing of space responded directly to this perceived need.

The above analysis of this collective dwelling typology is illustrated in Figures 9 and 10.



**Figure 9.** Socio-spatial analysis of the grandmother's playground. Source: Drawing by the author



**Figure 10.** Left to right: the playground as a focal meeting point, crossed by moulding workers, farmers and neighbours; the multi-generational household. Source: Photos by the author, October 2019



### 5.3 Institutional dwelling: the unused cultural hall, Jing'an village

#### (1) Actor

50-55-year-old retired woman, relocated with her husband and son's family to a new rural housing development / 60-year-old retired man living alone in a brick house extension in the older part of the village.

#### (2) Material space

Jing'an's new cultural hall stood along the recently constructed Jinchuan road, the busy SMT access road severing the village into new and old areas. The four-storey building on the corner of a new rural housing development had an austere architectural style and polished tile façade. The ground floor consisted of a spacious open reception and waiting area, with small office rooms along both sides labelled 'women/men's resting room' and another with equipment for natural disasters. An exhibition about the village was displayed on the walls. On the first floor, rows of wooden benches faced a small stage. The walls of the adjacent library area were covered with information about distinguished villagers, the village committee, and village history, agricultural production and crafts. On the second floor were offices and meeting rooms, while the third floor comprised an expansive conference hall.

#### (3) Everyday practice

From the man's perspective, the new cultural hall has disregarded existing social nodes in the village, while the old and new areas of the village represent contrasting lifestyles and socio-economic situations. The residents of the new rural housing development have largely lost their farming practices and agricultural land. In the fields behind the old village, the remaining wild rice farming was primarily for household use, contrasting with the imagery of extensive wild rice production presented in the cultural hall. Various open spaces in the new formal development have been appropriated by villagers from the older dense neighbourhood, such as the cultural hall car park used to dry rice and beans, suggesting informal negotiations between

new and old villagers over the use of space at different times of the day.

#### (4) Interface

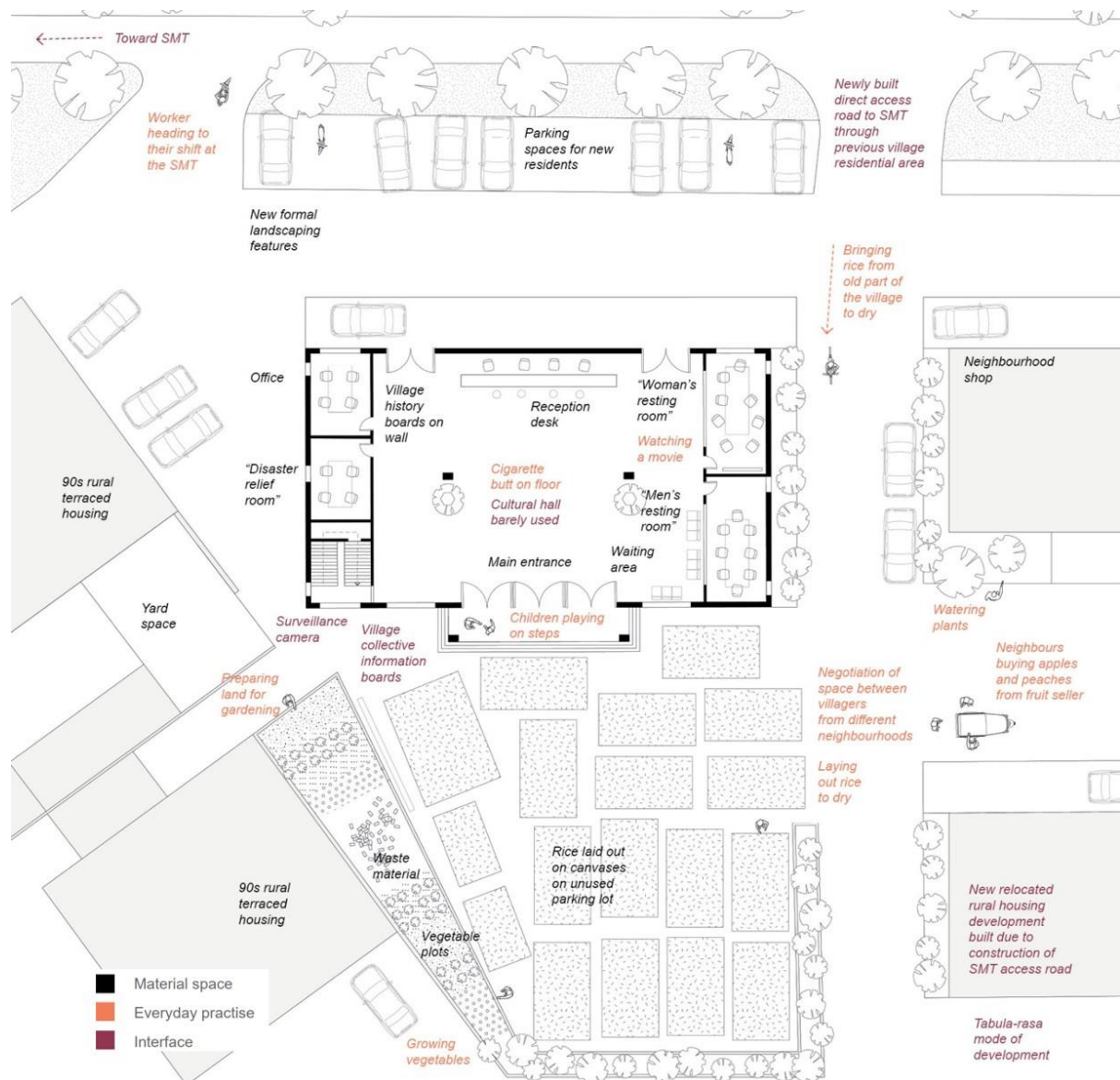
The new rural housing development was built adjacent to factory complexes and worker accommodation, demonstrating the encroachment of the moulding industry into residential areas. The woman's son and neighbour are moulding workers. From her perspective, industrialisation suggests progress while negative environmental impacts are not considered. Planning drawings of two new housing developments were posted on the village collective information board outside the cultural hall, indicating a grid of new roads over the existing village in a tabula-rasa manner, like the SMT access road. The woman appreciated her upgraded living conditions in the new rural housing development and the cultural hall, built three years previously, was a source of pride, though it appeared almost entirely unused. On the other hand, the man from the older part of the village expressed frustration about land acquisitions, perceiving that the village collective was profiting without providing sufficient employment support or social assistance.

The above analysis of this institutional dwelling typology is illustrated in Figures 11 and 12.

## 6. DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Overview of transformation dynamics

Industrialisation is not only transforming physical space in the area through farmland acquisition, but also extending into everyday lives: as family members employed at a local moulding enterprise, a means of informal income, or losing farmland to a new factory. Entire villages are heavily reliant on the moulding industry due to the highly lucrative rental of land to factories by village collectives, putting the area at risk of industrial decline. The interviews revealed that many ex-farmers were satisfied with compensation payments and undergo drastic increases in wealth and/or living conditions. However, a common concern was that no



**Figure 11.** Socio-spatial analysis of the unused cultural hall. Source: Drawing by the author



**Figure 12.** Left to right: new cultural hall facing the SMT access road; unused reception hall with village 'exhibition'; farmer's appropriation of the parking space and adjacent new rural housing development. Source: Photos by the author, October 2019

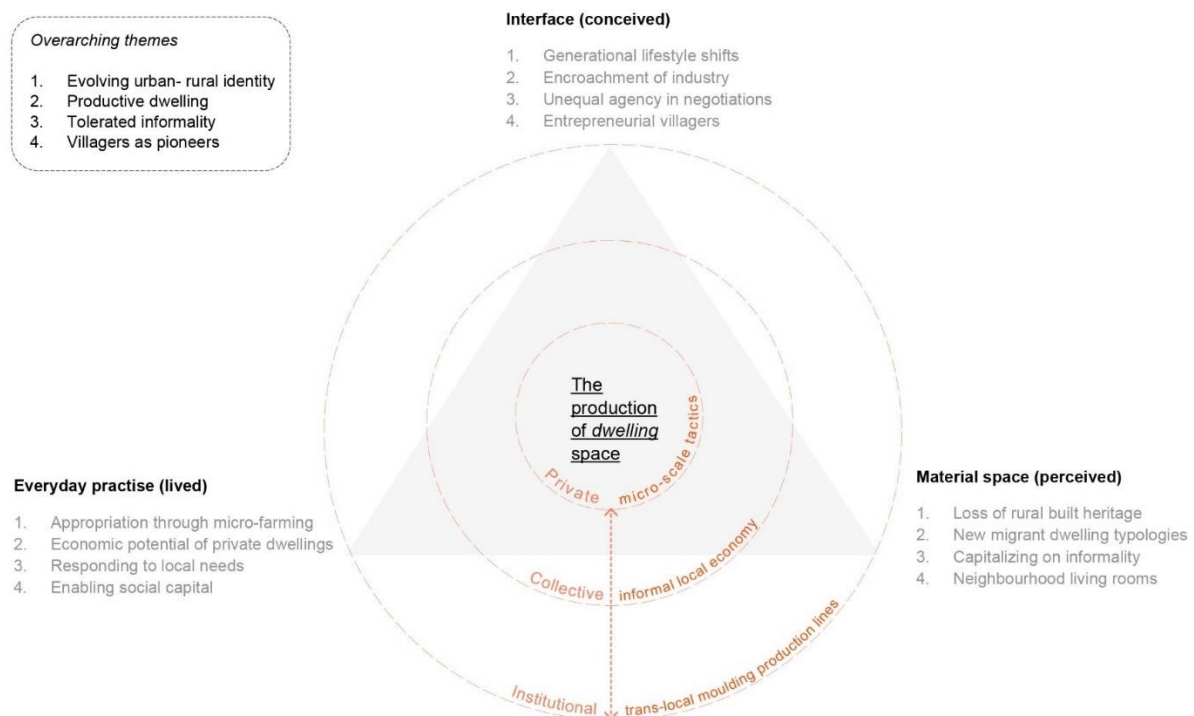
alternative employment was offered to counteract losses of livelihood in the long-term. While those with higher-skilled positions have profited highly, the local unskilled workforce struggles to reap the benefits of industrial upgrading. Some SMT enterprises offer up-skilling programs, however it remains unclear who can access this support and how villagers can adapt to the transformations without already existing resources. With their long-established role in the area's industrialisation, the general feeling toward migrants appeared positive, wherein they represent progressive development and income opportunities. Furthermore, the interviews identified that the family unit remains central to post-rural society, despite varying living arrangements (dispersed geographically, large extended households).

The villages in this study offer snapshots into the varying stages of transformation of this productive hinterland, revealing complex actor networks. Villages become 'nodes' in interactions of capital, land and labour<sup>[8,38]</sup>, demonstrating their influence on top-down processes of extended urbanisation. Relating the findings to the conceptualised analytical

scales demonstrates how, through various dwelling practices, villagers become multi-scalar agents of change [Figure 13]:

- *Institutional (macro)*: industrial investment at regional and global scales transforms villages, their land crucial in providing for industrial uses. Villagers are embedded, formally and informally, in trans-local production lines which generate employment and attract regional labour.
- *Collective (meso)*: at a city and neighbourhood scale, villagers create an informal local economy through productive households and bottom-up amenity provision.
- *Private (micro)*: at a family and individual scale, micro-scale survival tactics and evolving urban-rural practices play a crucial role in placemaking and facilitating social capital.

Through the thematic analysis of interviews and field notes, and spatial analysis of dwelling typologies, four overarching themes and sub-themes were identified (see sections 6.2 to 6.5).



**Figure 13.** Relating the emerging themes back to the spatial triad to demonstrate their role in the multi-scalar production of dwelling space. Source: Diagram by the author

## 6.2 Productive dwelling

(1) Economic potential of private dwellings  
New rural housing developments attempt to compartmentalise dwelling and productive practices. However, even within regulated environments, practices remain intertwined as industrial activity creeps into housing. Extra living space is highly valued, particularly for its opportunity to generate income through household workshops. In some cases, work space is integrated into bedrooms or garages, in others, entire private dwellings are repurposed for productive use. Some opportunistic villagers capitalise on their relocation into more spacious developments, while villagers in older houses construct extensions. Thus, the SMT was often considered indirectly positive in terms of the productive potential of household industries.

### (2) Encroachment of industry

The rapid shift from agricultural to non-agricultural income sources has a profound impact on villagers' everyday practices, yet the majority of respondents focused on the SMT's short-term gains. The long-term environmental impacts of the integration of industry into the everyday environment appeared largely overlooked by residents and policymakers alike. In terms of social impacts, a concern raised constantly highlighted the harsh working conditions demanded by the moulding industry (long working hours, 24-hour shifts), leaving insufficient time for family and leisure. While some respondents expressed pride in the local moulding industry, others stated difficulties in maintaining this working lifestyle in the long-term, despite the financial gains.

### (3) Migrant dwelling typologies

Migration has been a family strategy for numerous respondents, and the increase of migrant workers into the area due to the SMT's employment opportunities is changing the physical spaces in the surrounding villages. Migrants face a range of constraints: hukou restrictions, low paid work, and lack of affordable housing. In response, the informal rental market has generated new dwelling

typologies and living arrangements, such as extensions to existing housing, temporary container structures on driveways, or informal subdivisions of new rural houses. By introducing their own spatial appropriation, migrants add to the hybrid everyday dwelling practices in the villages.

## 6.3 Evolving urban-rural identity

### (1) Generational lifestyle shifts

The rapid pace of industrialisation is resulting in dramatic lifestyle changes, and perceptions around urban and rural lifestyles differ vastly between different age groups. While many within older generations remain attached to traditional rural practices centred around agricultural production, younger respondents generally embraced busy urban lifestyles and struggle to relate to the nostalgia of older family members or neighbours. Nevertheless, engrained rural identities continue to shape the everyday practices of many villagers.

### (2) Micro-farming appropriation

Spaces suggesting a persistence of rural identity remained prevalent, even in more urbanised villages. While the majority of villages have lost most of their agricultural production, many retain their practice of vegetable growing for household consumption in any available space around housing, industrial workshops, and vacant land. Despite new rural housing developments generally failing to provide space which caters for rural lifestyles, the disassociated habitual farming practices from older villagers remain. Farmland is re-appropriated at a micro-scale, where spaces designed for urban lifestyles, such as parking spaces and driveways, are often used for drying rice, vegetable gardens and keeping chickens.

### (3) Loss of rural built heritage

New rural housing developments typically disregard the typo-morphology of existing village and dwelling layouts. Despite CT rhetoric of promoting local culture, a loss of built heritage was common in the villages. Traditional housing structures, many with

ornate decorative features, are left in a dilapidated condition without inclusion in development plans <sup>[27]</sup>. Often re-purposed as storage, workshop, kitchen, or rental space, these old structures were generally disregarded, while institutionalised dwelling structures such as temples held more value. Another example of this forgotten rural landscape is the water ponds, formerly integral to daily life in villages for drinking water and washing vegetables. Although some ponds are still used for washing clothes, most appeared contaminated with household and industrial waste.

#### **6.4 Tolerated informality**

##### **(1) Responding to local needs**

In many villages, the informal economy made up of moulding and textile enterprises is crucial in generating the access to employment that the state fails to provide. Many villagers consider formal land use regulations and SMT-related construction restrictions an unfair constraint. Informal extensions or adaptations of existing structures were common, due to a perception that older houses lack space for expanding families. This extended space also enables the informal rental market, providing affordable accommodation to the migrant workforce and an alternative income for landless farmers.

##### **(2) Capitalising on informality**

Due to the significant role of informality in the functioning of villages and the regional economy, it is a reality tolerated by village collectives. Respondents cited cases of the informal economy being recognised as an opportunity for profit from the top-down, wherein village collectives have formalised illegal workshops, converting them into official village enterprises. Many form a part of the moulding production line. In this way, village collectives use informality to manipulate strict land use regulations and legitimise violations for their own gain.

##### **(3) Unequal agency in negotiations**

Amid a general lack of awareness of development plans, residents from new and

old village areas often had disparate views on development dynamics. Despite positive accounts from relocated villagers, multiple residents in older village areas expressed underlying frustrations with authorities, who they perceived were profiting from farmland sales without considering the longer-term impacts. Resources such as personal connections or wealth were noted to enable manipulations of formal planning processes and secure benefits from the SMT such as socio-economic mobility. Lacking such networks, migrants particularly struggle with unequal agency in achieving upgrades to living conditions and access to services. However, in some cases migrants were able to gain leverage in negotiations through family members with pre-existing local connections.

#### **6.5 Pioneering villagers**

##### **(1) Entrepreneurial villagers**

Many cases of innovative socio-spatial appropriation were identified, often driven by an entrepreneurial mindset. Examples include the creative craftsmanship of a local carpenter's private dwelling, and the elaborately designed workshop of a door manufacturer, mimicking traditional southern Chinese architecture, where creative adaptive reuse was perceived as a marketing device for the family business. Another example is the informal recycling practices identified as an economic incentive in some villages. Such entrepreneurial villagers did not remain attached to farming practices, and instead adapt to and embrace new types of practices as opportunities emerging from industrialisation processes.

##### **(2) Neighbourhood living rooms**

In other cases, villagers took on the role of providing neglected public services, using their own resources to re-purpose space for a social function. Particularly within new rural housing developments, it was common for garages to be used as public living rooms and neighbourhood mahjong halls. In other examples, shared space was created in communal vegetable gardens, or on the street with a temporary structure erected for a

neighbourhood party. Simple facilities appeared sufficient in creating spaces of social interaction, while some institutionalised spaces had been appropriated by villagers to serve their own social purposes, such as the village senior centres that became key public spaces for parties or film screenings.

### (3) Enabling social capital

The importance of social capital among neighbours was often referred to by respondents, who wished to be relocated together. Responding to a lack of effective collective spaces to foster these networks, many villagers took it upon themselves to provide them. The social capital built by these spaces is critical in allowing for informal negotiations between villagers, and the ability for effective negotiation will be crucial as the area continues its transformation.

## 7. CONCLUSION

### 7.1 Negotiated placemaking

The findings have demonstrated the resilience of local actors' responses to top-down urbanisation policies and their instrumental role in placemaking at multiple scales. Despite functionalist spatial planning approaches, the intertwining of dwelling and productive practices continues to define everyday life, generating new typologies that respond to local needs and link to regional networks. The resultant informal economy provides a critical support system for marginalised groups, yet is often appropriated by village collectives. While farmers rapidly transition to industrial workers, landlords, and entrepreneurs, the rural practices of older generations persist. Villagers seize both economic and social opportunities from urbanisation processes, through networks of social capital that allow for effective negotiation and kinship.

However, these negotiable practices<sup>[50]</sup>, between various scales and actors carving out their own needs, identities, and habits, must be "constantly negotiated, re-negotiated and readjusted by reacting to changes in global, national, or local conditions"<sup>[8]</sup>. Furthermore,

they are characterised by unequal agency, while leaving longer-term environmental and social impacts unaddressed. On one hand, policy visions fail to achieve high-level aims of food security and environmental protection, and on the other, the long-term desires and needs of local actors are neglected.

### 7.2 Lessons for co-producing transformation

This study has shed light on the local impact of a rural urbanisation policy in China previously lacking empirical insight. It introduced an original socio-spatial methodology to the extended urbanisation discourse, combining social science and architectural research methods to generate multi-scalar analytical categories – private, collective, institutional dimensions of dwelling. In revealing hybrid characteristics and actor interrelationships, the identified urban-rural typologies – productive dwelling, evolving urban-rural identity, tolerated informality, pioneering villagers – offer a lens for defining new theoretical categories and an evidence base for planning instruments that more closely reflect conditions and needs in transitional areas.

In China, institutional re-adjustments and local government commitment are both necessary to implement more collaborative and unified urban-rural planning mechanisms. Beyond industrial concentration, development plans need to facilitate sustainable agriculture-industry transition through a diverse local economy linking everyday practices, stakeholder needs, existing economic activities, and local knowledge in innovative regional industries. Incremental in-situ development should be promoted over demolition, while new developments must provide flexibility to facilitate shifting rhythms of everyday practices and social capital networks within rural-urban transformation. However, only with political will to confront deeply embedded power structures and structural constraints, such as the hukou and dual land system, can these challenges be genuinely addressed.



To the global debate, the study demonstrates the need to overcome redundant urban-rural administrative boundaries and conceptualisations in planning, with interventions that function at a variety of scales. Finally, further research is needed to advance knowledge production within 'ordinary' cities and urban-rural transitional areas. As an open-ended empirical study providing a snapshot into a particular case study, the findings should be built upon by mapping changes over time and conducting further comparative studies to support broader conclusions.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks are owed to Dr. Xiaoxue Gao, Dr. Huang Huang, Wenxiao Qu, Tian Qin and Yuwei Zhang for their crucial translation support in the field, and to Dr. Josefine Fokdal and Prof. Dr. Philipp Misselwitz for their constructive supervision during this research project.

### FUNDING

The fieldwork this article draws upon was supported by DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) Promos Stipendium and the Urban Rural Assembly project, funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), while the author was employed by Habitat Unit, Technische Universität Berlin.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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