

BEAUTIFUL CHINA: THE EXPERIENCE OF JIANGSU'S RURAL VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Fulong Wu · Lan Zhou



Figure 1: Improved Village Housing in Gaochun, Jiangsu. Photo by Fulong Wu

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the practice of rural village improvement in Jiangsu province of China. The program has profound implications for China's sustainable urbanization and the development of better urban and rural habitats. Jiangsu's village improvement program is an experiment to transform the built environment in rural areas to revitalise the rural society. It emphasises the protection of the rural environment, improving living conditions in the villages, and enhancement of rural landscapes. The experiment provides some valuable experience for China's rural modernisation and may be relevant to other developing countries, which are striving to improve the quality of life in their rural areas.

In 2012, the Chinese new leadership announced a new vision to build 'beautiful China'. This is a profound shift from the previous development approach which mainly relied on industrialisation and export-oriented production to a new strategy to enhance the quality of life. According to this vision, Beautiful China will become a better-off society. To realise this vision, the division between urban and rural areas must be broken down. The strategy of urban-rural integration is thus a major measure to achieve harmonious development. In the last two decades of rapid industrial growth, China has paid a heavy environmental cost. Economic development is concentrated in the cities, while the rural areas still lack basic facilities and social services. The new roadmap of urbanisation must be people-oriented (Wu 2013).

In this article, we describe the experience of Jiangsu in the programme of village improvement to demonstrate the effort to achieve better rural-urban integration in China. Jiangsu province is located in the coastal region near Shanghai. Its total population in 2010 was 78.66 million, making it one of the most densely populated provinces. It is also one of the most developed regions in China, as its gross domestic product (GDP) ranked the second in China, and fourth in terms of per capita output. Since the economic reform, Jiangsu province has experienced two phases of urbanisation. The former phase (from 1979 to 2001) was driven by the development of township and village enterprises (TVEs) in southern Jiangsu, and consequently the development of small towns. The latter phase (from 2001 to the present) is characterised by the emergence of development zones and an export-oriented economy in the larger cities.

As a more developed province, Jiangsu has achieved significant economic growth. In 2011,

Jiangsu's per capita GDP reached 68,000 Yuan, equivalent to USD 10,800, and the urbanisation level is 61.9%, 10.6 percentage points higher than the national average. Its secondary and tertiary sectors together accounted for 93% of GDP, which means Jiangsu is essentially industrialised. To develop further, Jiangsu would need to find a new area of growth.

The program of rural village improvement has been adopted to promote rural-urban integration (Zhou et al. 2013). Rural villages in China refer to the settlements in the rural areas lived in by peasants. When villages grow into larger settlements, either with the total non-agricultural population of over 2,000 persons or where the percentage of the non-agricultural population in the total township population exceeds 10%, the status of town can be designated. These towns are also called 'designated towns'. In terms of population and development management, villages belong to the rural system, while towns are managed in a more regulated way. Rural villages are mostly occupied by farmers. Because rural villages are self-managed and often under-invested in public services, their living environment needs to be improved. In Jiangsu, over 55,000 rural villages have completed the improvement work, and approximately 10,000 rural villages are currently undergoing improvement. Such improvement has gradually enhanced the quality of public services in rural areas and has greatly benefited the rural farmers. This article will present Jiangsu's experience of village improvement and its significance in the advancement of 'Beautiful China'.

CHINA'S RURAL MODERNISATION

Chinese civilisation has a long and rich tradition of agricultural production and an established rural society. Fei Xiaotong, a renowned Chinese sociologist, described the foundations of Chinese society as "earth-bounded" (Fei 1992; Fei 2001). In the socialist period, the adoption of a household registration system divided the urban and rural areas, leading to urban-rural dualism. State-led industrialisation resulted in a bias towards major cities, while the development of rural areas was neglected. The rural area was largely left out as a self-contained society outside formal state welfare provision and public services.

Chinese rural areas have experienced profound changes since the economic reform in 1979. For Jiangsu, the most important change is rural industrialisation driven by the development of township and village enterprises (TVEs) (Fei 2001). In the 1980s and 1990s, TVEs enjoyed great success, especially in southern Jiangsu, creating a widely known 'South Jiangsu model' (*sunan moshi*). In 2001 China joined WTO and since then has become the world's factory. The TVE economy largely collapsed, because of the growth of foreign investment and competition from foreign enterprises or enterprises invested in by Chinese in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Southern Jiangsu has experienced rapid industrialisation through foreign and inward investment. The growth of cities, supported by industrial and development zones, has become a dominant feature. Under the market-oriented reform, a vibrant, heterogenous and diverse urbanism is taking place (Wu 2011). The gap between urban and rural areas is growing, and there is a startling contrast between newly developed 'commodity housing estates' in the city and dilapidated conditions in the rural areas. The lack of public facilities and social services in the latter is a major problem.

Recognising the importance of agriculture and rural areas, the Chinese government proposed to promote urban and rural integration and provide basic services to the rural areas. The balanced development of urban and rural areas is also regarded as instrumental to China's modernisation and development on the world stage. The village improvement program is a major policy in Jiangsu to achieve a more balanced urban and rural development.

THE VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

In Sept 2011, the provincial government of Jiangsu announced the initiation of the 'The Beautiful City and Country Action Plan' during the 12th Five-Year period. The plan utilises rural village improvement as a breakthrough point for advancing urban-rural integration in Jiangsu, and aims to complete the improvement process across approximately 198,000 villages (including 55,000 villages which have already been improved under the beautiful city program) within the province in three to five years time. The main focus of the plan

is to improve production, ecological and living conditions in rural areas for farmers and become a model region of 'Beautiful China'.

Rural village improvement needs to be carried out while at the same time preserving the architectural heritage, the historical and cultural legacy and maintaining existing social network structures and spatial patterns. Major towns must place more emphasis on hygiene issues, water-course maintenance, waste collection and transfer, the safety of drinking water and the recycling of animal manure. In 2015, villages in Jiangsu are expected to reach a rate of 80% for daily disposal collection and recycling. Moreover, the wastewater treatment rate is also anticipated to increase significantly.

Legislation

Numerous documents and laws were published to provide guidance and criteria for the improvement of the rural environment in Jiangsu. These include 'Assessment Criteria for Rural Village Improvement in Jiangsu', 'Grading Schemes for Rural Village Improvement' and 'Assessment Methods and Procedures for Rural Village Improvement'.

The provincial government urged the Department of Construction to fully explore and utilise their technical capacities. In addition, the government also initiated a province-wide cooperation between the planning, design and construction divisions and research organisations to investigate the rural environment and frame strategies to promote the characteristics of villages in Jiangsu. 'Rural Village Improvement Technical Guidance' and relevant video sources were designed, published and delivered across villages in Jiangsu. Technical training for around 10,000 managers from different levels was provided by the provincial government, which greatly improved the capacity for advancement of the rural environment at the local level.

The Survey

To understand the living conditions in the rural villages, the Department of Construction of Jiangsu organised a province-wide social survey. The survey tried to understand the demands of rural residents for the improvement of their quality of life. 283 villages were selected, with each having different development stages, locations and dis-

tances from the major cities, and local cultures. In each village, 20 households were randomly selected to conduct face to face interviews. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the villages surveyed (Zhou et al. 2013).

According to the survey, about 65.5% of rural residents said that they wished to stay in their rural areas because the quality of air was good, the natural environment was pleasant and there were close neighbourhood relations. The result suggests that the rural areas are still desirable places to live.

The survey also found that the quality of rural dwellings in Jiangsu is generally good because a significant proportion of houses in Jiangsu were built in recent decades. About 90% of rural dwellings were constructed after 1979. The dwellings constructed in the pre-1949 period and from 1949 to 1978 only account for 0.8% and 5.9% respectively. This means the demand for the improvement of dwellings is less significant.

In contrast, the demand for improvement in the quality of life is more in the rural environment. In particular, there are concerns over the lack of basic infrastructure and facilities, including waste disposal, water source, and public space.

The survey also revealed a strong willingness for participation from rural farmers to improve their living environment. About 38% of interviewees said that they were willing to be involved, and even 35.8% were happy to manage the living environment (Zhou et al. 2013).

This large-scale social survey provides some useful information about the rural villages for the formulation of the action plan and policies in Jiangsu.

PLANNING PRACTICES OF VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT

The main objective for Jiangsu in the 12th Five-Year Plan period is to complete the village improvement program, which covers about 198,000 'natural villages' (rural settlements formed naturally without designated administrative status, that is, they do not have the status of 'designated towns'). This is a considerable challenge because of the magnitude of the work.

The practices of village improvement in Jiangsu have some interesting features. Firstly, in

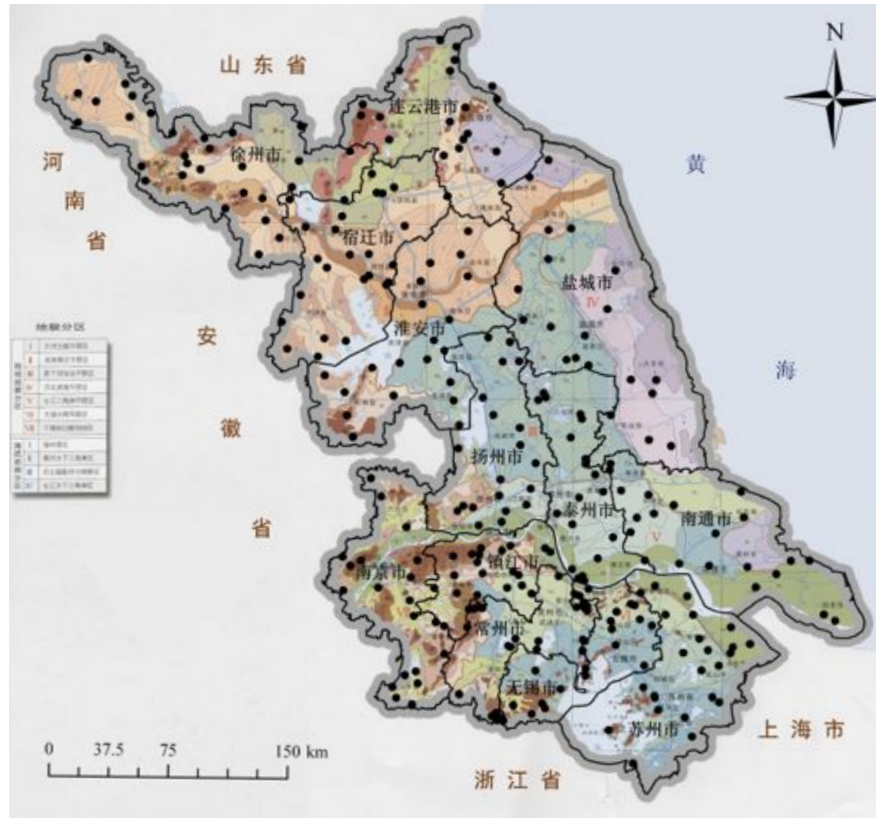


Figure 2: Distribution of Jiangsu villages surveyed

contrast to a compulsory program, the program in Jiangsu stresses respect for the preferences of rural residents. With most rural dwellings already improved, further development should not involve large-scale demolition or reconstruction. It should focus more on the enhancement of the living environment and on making incremental changes suitable for the local conditions.

Secondly, the village improvement program classifies the rural villages in Jiangsu into two categories. Guidance has been established at two different levels: the first level is 'liveable villages', and the second level is 'healthier villages'.

For the liveable villages, the standard is higher and regulation is more stringent. The regulation is applied to these newly developed villages, which mostly have a site layout plan. There are about 40,000 villages in this category. These villages are also known as 'planned villages', or 'planned villages with a selected location', because their loca-

tion is usually chosen in the process of merging several natural villages into a larger one, that is, these 'planned villages' are different from 'natural villages', although the planned villages are still rural settlements. Figure 3 shows the site layout plan of a village, which has been designed to create a new pattern of village houses. These villages are generally built to a higher standard according to the guidance of 'six regulations and six improvements' criteria. The six regulations cover garbage, sewage, the cluttered environment, waste from agricultural production, industrial pollution sources, and maintenance of watercourse and ditch ponds. The six improvements refer to transport access, buildings with local characteristics, everyday management, public services and facilities, access to safe drinking water, and greening the living environment. After applying these criteria in the village, the aim is to create a more liveable environment that attracts more people to settle down.

The villages which developed spontaneously in the past belong to the second category of 'naturally developed villages'. The aim is to develop them into 'healthier villages', which is more pragmatic and relevant to the urgent need of the residents. There are about 150,000 villages in this category. No strict requirement for redevelopment is imposed on them. Rather, they are required to follow the 'three regulations and one guarantee' criteria. The aim is to improve the quality of the living environment. The 'three regulations' cover the requirement of garbage, the cluttered environment, and the maintenance of watercourse and ditch ponds and 'one guarantee' refers to the fulfilment of basic living conditions of farmers. It can be seen that the requirement of this category is less stringent than that of the previous category because the aim is more towards the living conditions rather than quality of the environment. However, the population of rural villages of both categories is mainly made up of farmers.

Thirdly, the village improvement program emphasises the preservation of distinctive cultures of village life during the building redevelopment. This is achieved through the maintenance of existing landscape features and historical and cultural heritage in designated historical and cultural settlements. The program is also aimed at producing a cultural renaissance in the rural areas.

Fourthly, the program adopts a strategy of incremental changes and gradual improvement. In the initial phase, local government plays a role to set up 'model villages' to display some initial achievement of environmental improvement, which further attracts the wider participation of local farmers. The approach tries to mobilise villagers to participate in the improvement program. The initial investment from the government thus became a leverage to accelerate the process of village improvement.

Finally, in terms of funding, the program sets up a sustained long-term mechanism which uses multiple sources of capital, including funds from collective economies (the income from managing village assets), money raised by the villagers themselves, county or township fiscal subsidies, and special funding from the higher level of government (e.g. the provincial government).

Cui (2012) suggests that there should be four major aspects of village improvement. Firstly, eco-



Figure 3: The site layout plan of a planned village

nomical restructuring will lead a shift from manufacturing activities to sight-seeing and tourism, recreation, and leisure activities. Secondly, the re-configuration of spatial structure and land uses will increase compactness and more efficient use of land. Fragmented land uses are to be re-adjusted to form a relatively larger plot for residential and industrial uses. This will increase the compactness because the previous village land uses have been more scattered and dispersed. Thirdly, ecological and environmental protection will remedy pollution and confine and alleviate polluted areas. Water pollution treatment is the key task for Jiangsu because of the extensive water areas. Fourthly, landscape improvements will maintain and enhance the image of rural settlements and agricultural fields. The improvement will reflect local characteristics in different regions of Jiangsu, such as the water landscape, and mountainous areas, and plain fields.

Consolidation of naturally developed villages into planned villages has been one measure to increase land use efficiency (Zhou, et al. 2010). The slogan is the 'three concentrations': rural residential areas will gradually be concentrated in newly built rural communities; rural industrial land will be concentrated in industrial parks; and agricultural land will be concentrated in suitably sized farms. The population of villages will increase from that of naturally developed villages with an average of 164 to an average of 586 persons. In Jiangsu, the current land used for 248,890 natural villages and 16,738 'administrative villages' (with a designated administrative status, *xingzhen cun*) is 781,172 hectares. The average village land use per resident is 186 square metres, which is twice as much as that of urban residents. Through these agglomeration measures, it is estimated that 266,000 hectares of village land will be saved (Wu, 2012).

However, the motivation for merging rural villages often comes from the need to give the city more construction land. Under the Chinese land management system, each area of local government is allocated a fixed land construction quota because the central government regards the preservation of farmland as the key objective. Local government cannot develop further industrial or urban uses if the land quota for construction is used up. However, local government can create additional land quota through demolishing village land and turn it into agricultural land, because village land belongs to 'construction land'. Converting village land into agricultural land means that the local government can develop more construction land somewhere else because the total construction land is controlled by the land development quota. However, such a local government-led 'new countryside movement' has been criticised for its continuing urban and industrial bias because it favours the development of the cities and industrial land development, and tends to deprive farmers of the incentive to expand the revenue of local government from land sale (Wu et al. 2012).

The village improvement program, however, does not aim at releasing village land for urban construction. Rather, it aims to improve the living conditions by providing basic infrastructure and services. For example, by the end of 2010, Jiangsu

had prepared sewage treatment plans for 2,666 villages (Wu 2012, p. 31). The city of Changshu has been nominated by the Ministry of Housing and Urban and Rural Development (MoHURD) as a demonstration region for village sewage treatment.

In Jintu County, for example, a comprehensive garbage collection system has been set up. In each village, there are garbage bins every 100 metres, and five to six garbage transfer points, and vehicles to transport the garbage to compression stations. For every 1,000 residents, the standard is to allocate 3 waste collectors (Figure 4). By 2011 the county had developed 3,258 garbage transfer points, and there were 815 garbage vehicles (Figure 5), and every town had one garbage compression station (Figure 6) (Xia 2012, p. 90). The development of rural villages and their infrastructure reflects the perpetual effort to rejuvenate rural society after a long period of marginalization (Zhou 2012).

FINANCIAL INPUT

Provincial and local governments in Jiangsu have resolved to improve the rural environment through substantial financial input. The city of Suzhou, in particular, has designated a budget of 2.6 billion Yuan and also raised 1.4 billion Yuan from other channels for improvement work between 2012-2015 (CCP office, 2013).

In 2012, the Jiangsu Finance Department allocated a special fund of 1.1 billion Yuan for rural village improvement by following guidelines from the 'Provincial Level Funding Guidance for Rural Village Improvement' document. This stream of funding was combined with funding of approximately 4 billion Yuan from central government, which subsequently triggered an input of social funds of around 30 billion Yuan in total. As a result of such investment, 55,000 villages had completed their improvement process (equivalent to 32% of the total number) by the end of 2012.



Figure 4: Vehicles used by garbage collectors in small villages (Jintu County). Photo by Min Xia



Figure 5: Garbage collection vehicles in towns and villages (Jintu County). Photo by Min Xia



Figure 6: Garbage compression equipment in Jiangsu (Jintu County)



Figure 7: A traditional street in one of Jiangsu's villages. Photo by Fulong Wu

SIGNIFICANCE OF VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT

China's urban and rural integration is a multi-faceted issue which hinges on social, economic, ecological, environmental, cultural and spatial spheres. This requires a comprehensive coordination in order to deliver substantial success.

The village improvement program has significantly improved the regional infrastructure in rural areas, including an integrated system of urban-rural water supply, waste disposal, sewage treatment and an extension of the urban bus system and services to the villages.

The program has also improved the rural landscape. It has not only preserved the traditional living environment characterised by old streets (Figure 7), rivers and small bridges, rural houses and settlements, and agricultural fields, but also enhanced the quality of tranquil rural life and diverse local cultures. Figure 8 shows peaceful rural

life near a river, and improved village housing.

The program has had a significant economic impact and has great market potential, which will open up a vast market in the rural area. The improvement of the rural environment has attracted tourists to villages, and the old street pattern has been preserved and improved. Figure 9 shows the preserved and rejuvenated traditional streets of Gaochun. The development of village tourism is expected to attract 5 million tourists during the period of the 12th Five-Year Plan², with tourism income reaching approximately 3 billion Yuan. Accordingly, rural farmers' income will increase by 2 billion Yuan. Overall, the village improvement program leverages 300 billion Yuan, boosting domestic demand and leading to steady growth of the economy. Figure 10 shows the development of electric sight-seeing vehicles which transfer tourists in the popular weekend tourist destination of 'slow town' in Gaochun, Nanjing. Small ho-

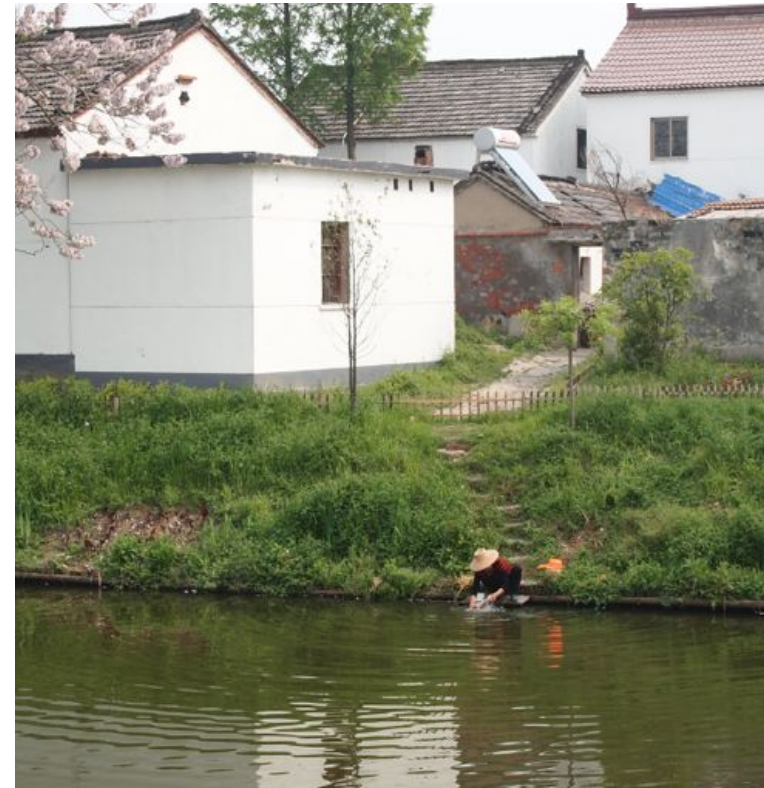


Figure 8: Village housing and tranquil rural life under Jiangsu's village improvement program. Photo by Fulong Wu



Figure 9: A preserved and rejuvenated traditional street in Gaochun. Photo by Fulong Wu



Figure 10: Facilities developed for tourism in Gaochun.
Photo by Fulong Wu



Figure 11: Small hotels built and managed by villagers for tourists.
Photo by Fulong Wu



Figure 12: The elderly in a local community centre, playing mahjong.
Photo by Fulong Wu

tels and restaurants have been built to accommodate and entertain visitors and guests (Figure 11)

Finally, the development not only improves the hygiene quality, but also strengthens the sense of belonging and community attachment. It helps to develop a harmonious society and enhances the capacity of governance at the grassroots level. Figure 12 shows the development of a community centre where the elderly gather together, happily playing mahjong.

Village improvement is a complex program which requires the coordination of many government departments, organisations, and participants. The program has mobilised various local governments, while motivating the farmers to improve their villages in a bottom-up way. The experiment aids the process of finding a new method of administration and governance which can combine the financial support of the government and self-motivated residents in village improvement.

CONCLUSION

Fei Xiaotong, a prominent sociologist in China, suggested that the rural areas contain the fundamental genes to understand Chinese society and thus the key to social transformation (Fei 1992). Further, Wu Liangyong, an academician of the China Academy of Sciences and a renowned architectural professor at Tsinghua University, argues that there is extensive research into Chinese cities. On the contrary, research into the rural areas is still limited and inadequate. This suggests the need to promote studies of China's rural areas, which requires a conceptual shift from the urban-oriented development approach to a more balanced approach to reducing urban-rural division.

For a long time, rural areas have been neglected. They were only places to provide cheap labour for state industrialisation and land for export-oriented production. Now, the importance of sustaina-

ble rural development has been recognised in China. In some small towns in Jiangsu province, the size of population has stabilised, and more people have returned to the rural areas. The interest in rural areas is increasing. Rather than saying farewell to the rural villages, a new museum of the Culture of Agriculture is being built to reflect the historical change and continuity (Figure 13). Cui (2012) suggests that rural village improvement is part of a profound movement of urban-rural integration in today's China, which reflects the changing relationship between urban and rural areas. The city should no longer exploit the rural areas but rather, after entering a stage of medium level of industrialisation, the city should support rural development to achieve sustainable development.

Jiangsu's village improvement program is an experiment to transform the built environment in rural areas to revitalise rural society. It emphasises the protection of the rural environment,

improving living conditions in the villages, and enhancement of rural landscapes. The improvement creates impacts beyond introducing tidiness and hygiene into rural villages but creates cultural and landscape values in the rural areas. Hectares of canola flower, peach orchard, and fir trees are creating an attractive landscape in rural Jiangsu. While landscaping may not bring immediate economic benefit, it enhances the quality of these places as a tourist and recreation destination (Wang 2012). In essence, village improvement is the farmers' regeneration of their homes rather than an imposed activity or regulation from the government.

Compared with rural development programs in other places in China, Jiangsu's village improvement scheme respects the farmers' entitlement and property rights. It does not require farmers to give up their land in exchange for social benefits in the city. It does not aim at large-scale

demolition of villages and formalising the informality in rural China (Wu et al. 2012). Rather, it helps farmers to improve the rural village as an attractive and liveable home. Throughout, city planning plays an important role in this process of social transformation, which resonates with the creation of the 'Garden Cities' concept in the 19th century industrialising England (Hall, 2002). Spatial changes may sound programmatic and trivial but the accumulated effect is profound and represents a more forceful shift from urban-rural dualism to urban-rural integration in China. Just as various historical planning ideals alleviated the negative impact of the Industrial Revolution, Jiangsu's village improvement provides an interesting experiment in response to the impact of globalisation, and it may be useful for many developing countries to reconsider the role of the countryside under similar rapidly urbanising and globalising processes. ■

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Figure 13: The new Museum for Cultures and Agriculture. Photo by Fulong Wu



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