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# Transition of villages during urbanization as collective communities: A case study of Kunshan, China

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## ABSTRACT

China's villages as collective communities have been in drastic transition since the economic reform. Kunshan, a county in the dynamically growing Yangtze River Delta, serves as a case study to demonstrate how its villages progress in the path of urbanization with the tension between community endeavors managed by the collective and individual pursuits based on bottom-up initiatives. Community-initiated development tends to be socially inclusive to the locals, and there is observed spatial equality between village communities because of equal access to local opportunities. Mutual support within the community or collectivity built upon attachment and affiliation is crucial social capital binding the community together when it undertakes drastic social and economic changes. During the process of rural development, villages try to maintain their collectivity from collective agriculture to collective industrialization and further to collective land shareholding cooperatives in the context of progressive urbanization. Rural villagers are gradually becoming urbanites while remained connected to the village community services.

## 1. Introduction

China's urbanization since the late 1970s has been a historical phenomenon in terms of its economic and social impacts on this populous country. Physical changes caused by urbanization are unprecedented in terms of scale and complexity. Many rural counties have been transformed drastically in the dynamically growing coastal region where Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta are the two rapidly urbanizing clusters. It is observed that there are two types of urbanization spatially intermingled within the municipal regions. One is the outward expansion of urban projects managed by the urban state; the other is the inward rural industrialization and non-agricultural development initiated by and confined in the village collective. Since the economic reforms launched in the early 1980s, villages close to cities in the regions with established industrial and market networks have been diversified progressively into non-agricultural economies, but villages in the less developed regions and less accessible areas remain largely in agricultural farming without much significant economic change. Therefore, this research is only applied to rural development in the dynamically urbanizing regions, Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta in particular, where rapid urbanization makes rural-urban transition significant and high population density and consequent land scarcity challenge as well as facilitate the transition. Or this case can serve as a reference to those less urbanized regions advancing towards more urbanized.

Because of high population density and thus low arable land per capita, subsistence farming has become a principal mode of rural production. As it is not promising to lead peasantry to prosperity, non-agricultural economies have been pursued for rural development. The transition of village communities striving for productivity during rural development occurs with the tension between collective cooperation and individual endeavors. The latter often have to take priority over the former because incentives are needed for productivity. The People's Communes are a living proof of failed collective production. If villages cease to exist as communities, however, the traditional formal and informal rural social cares will disappear, as it is happening in many villages in the poor regions where collective economies decline and revenues dwindle. So-called "rural flight" occurs when the young, educated and capable villagers leave and those not-so-young, not-so-educated and not-so-capable are left behind. How to retain villages as a viable community during their non-agricultural development is a vital issue for sustainable urbanization.

Being situated in the dynamic Yangtze River Delta region, Kunshan, presented as a case study by this paper, is an example of rural transformation in the context of drastic industrialization and urbanization (see Fig. 1). Economic and social progresses in Kunshan since the 1980s have been one of the most successful stories unfolded in China in the context of economic liberation and globalization (see Table 1). The rural agricultural county economy has been significantly transformed into an urban industrial economy. The case will demonstrate how its

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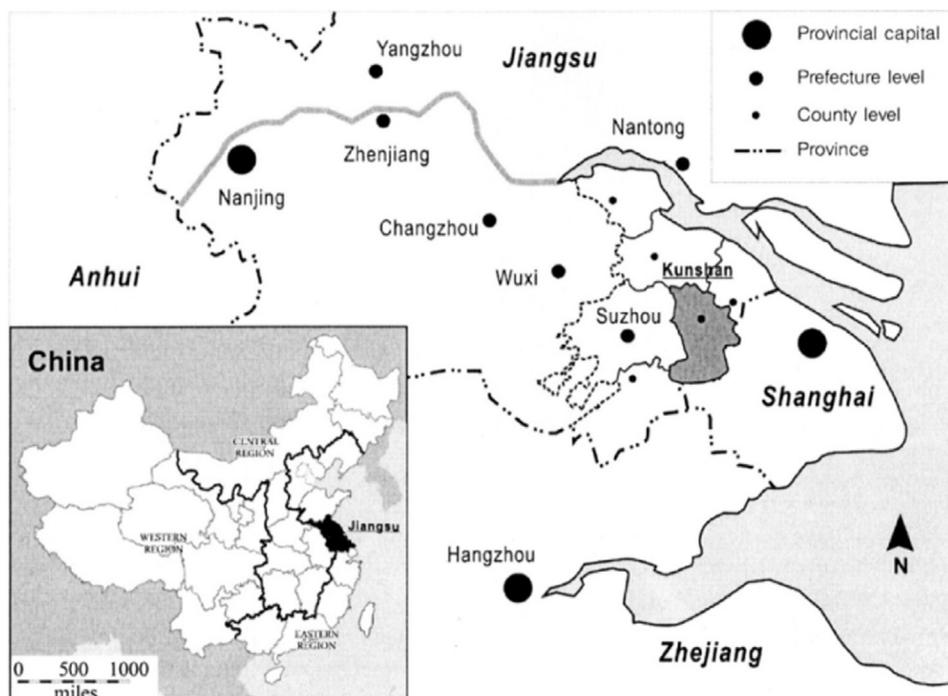


Fig. 1. Location of Kunshan in Yangtze River Delta and China.

Source: Wei, 2010, p.77.

**Table 1**  
Economic and social changes over the period 1980–2015, Kunshan.  
Source: KSBDDS, 1981–2016.

	1980	2000	2015
Locals (with <i>hukou</i> , thousand)	523.5	594.6	787.0
Migrants (without <i>hukou</i> , thousand)	0	131.3	1269.8 <sup>a</sup>
GDP (¥ billion)	0.3	20.1	308.0
GDP structure (%)			
Agriculture	44	6	1
Manufacturing	42	59	55
Services	14	35	44
Rural <i>hukou</i> : urban <i>hukou</i> , (%)	87:13	53:47	–

Note:

<sup>a</sup> The number of migrants is of 2014.

villages try to retain their collectivity in facing new challenges and opportunities during rapid rural change. After collective farming was replaced by individual household farming, collective rural industrialization was launched to keep the collectivity alive. This exciting and exuberant village industrialization was, however, short-lived under the ruthless market competition and displaced by the more efficient private and global enterprises. Interestingly and unexpectedly, it is observed that urbanization seems to have provided opportunities for villages to preserve their organization of community in the transition of non-agricultural development. Collectivity for rural development provides a buffer to villages against drastic social change inflicted by urbanization. Equality is retained to a certain extent between villages and village members by village-initiated socially inclusive collective development, but productivity based on incentives and marketability is a hard constraint which often determines the sustainability of rural growth. There is a fine balance to be maintained between equality and productivity so as to create socially and economically sustainable urbanization.

## 2. Villages as collective communities in transition

Rural development is one of the most critical challenges for the developing countries. Rural-urban migration in those developing countries is often pushed by rural poverty, which inevitably results in

urban poverty as well as cities are not able to provide enough jobs to an influx of migrants. Villages in China are a unique geographically-tied unit of social organization. Due to farmland resources made increasingly scarce by the burgeoning population growth, villages have developed a keen sense of territoriality in the face of constricted economic opportunities and perennial political disorder. China has become one of the countries with the lowest arable land per capita in the world (Dong, 1992), resulting in subsistence farming as a principal mode of its rural agriculture. Based on clan and lineage, villages had become a basic autonomous socio-economic unit, increasingly introverted and hostile to migrants. Being an agrarian country, China has had its rural poverty for a long history. Stability of the country where abject poverty was not uncommon was achieved largely by the social management of the villages. Mutual help based on collectivity mitigates hardship inflicted on the community to a large extent. There were close solidarity and coordination within the rural community that was managed by the village gentries before the 1949 revolution (Duara, 1988; Skinner, 1971).

The People's Commune movement initiated in the 1950s intended to gather limited farmlands together for collective farming based on the premises of economies of scale and to pre-empt recurrence of the rich-poor divide that had plagued China for long. It strengthened the nature of China's villages as a basic collective community in the rural regions. Villages remained as "self-governing" bodies (Gao, 1999). Moreover, the People's Commune transformed villages into a collective economic entity (Li, 2009). Village's social services (health, education and elderly welfare) and infrastructure were mainly the responsibilities of the village itself (Tsai, 2007; Wong, 1997). After 20 years in existence, nevertheless, People's Communes failed to raise agricultural productivity substantially so as to improve peasants' living standard, though it was evident that the rich-poor divide had not recurred. Poverty remained prevalent in the countryside. The failure was mainly due to the fact that the rigid centrally-controlled planning regime did not give sufficient incentives to the individual members. It was clear that too much centralized collectivity was to blame for the poor rural economies. The collective farming was thus dismantled and replaced by the Household Production Responsibility System (HPRS) in the early 1980s under the auspices of grand economic reforms.

Agricultural productivity has increased since tremendously. However, intensive household farming is not able to lead rural villages

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