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Chapter 1

The rural fringe in China: existing conflicts and prospective urban-rural synergies

Giulio Verdini

Introduction

The rural fringe of Chinese cities is today a transitional place between urban and rural areas where several contradictions take place partly inherited from the past and partly due to recent trends of development.

A consolidated body of international literature regarding the conceptualization of the fringe and the urban-rural interaction has already demonstrated that “populations and activities described either as “rural” or “urban” are more closely linked both across space and across sectors than is usually thought, and that distinctions are often arbitrary” (Tacoli 1998). Thus peri-urban households may be “multispatial”, with some members residing in towns or other engaged in non-farm activities in the countryside. China, as other emerging countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa, featuring rapid urbanisation, is no exception with similar “complexities of changing peri-urban production and livelihood systems” (Simon 2008).

Focusing on the fringe means also to verify whether the current discourse of urbanisation featuring China as a one-way urbanisation country, converging towards a universal pattern of globalisation, is still entirely applicable (Dick and Rimmer 1998). This assumption, who historically gained success especially among international organisations, is based on the recurring discourse of the “urban age”, statistically measured through the increasing amount of urban residents, but mainly inclined to prioritize urban agglomerations and to interpret the non-urban field as an empty field

(Brenner and Schmidt, 2014). Thus, Brenner and Schmidt advocate for a careful reading of the historic processes and socio-economic dimensions that play a fundamental role in shaping the fringe everywhere, which instead depict this empty field as a dense web of relations. However, in pursuing this goal, attempts to compare China and the West look similarly rather risky. In primis for the substantially different nature of the rural society still residing at the city fringe and moreover as the urban encroachment into the rural areas in China has been mainly driven by employment-led urban development (Webster and Muller 2004), only recently shifting toward a predominantly residential-led development. Last but not least China itself is a complex and diverse country featuring very different pattern of development. This requires to narrow down the observation not only to some specific functional dimensions of the fringe, adopting an analytical framework already applied elsewhere to conceptualize the “multiple fringe” (Gallent et al. 2006) but also to a spatial or regional one, in the attempt to distinguish between the multiples patterns of urbanisation that China is experiencing.

Therefore the study of the singularity of the rural fringe *a la chinoise*, together with comparisons within the country, appears to be more interesting in the debate about peri-urbanity, developed almost everywhere in the last two decades. The interest is due in particular to the way its historic pattern of development, and the current institutional settings that regulates the fringe, interacts with the pursued modernity of the country, strongly regional unbalanced. This is also depending on the way very different social formations, with different status, disposable income and life style cohabit together in the most developed part of the country, increasingly finding at the fringe unavoidable tensions or beneficial opportunities of mutual interaction.

In this respect the urbanisation process of the rural fringe, as a dense web of relations, will be observed primarily through the lens of the institutionalist approach, looking at the way Chinese localities are shaped by conflictive/cooperative actors' behaviours within a given set of constraints (Healey 1999). Particular attention will be given to the residential "hukou" system and the dual system of land ownership, collectively owned in rural areas and "de facto" privatized in urban areas.

Although the current "rules of games" might change in the future, due to the recurring announcements of reforms coming from the central government, these transformations will be very likely to be gradual. Therefore there is a need today of implementing rapidly practical solutions for managing the fierce planning challenges of the rural fringe, embedded in the current system and, meanwhile, to figure out how to manage the unfinished transition of the country, started with the "opening up" policy from the late seventies.

The Chinese Rural Fringe in Perspective

According to Friedmann in his book "China's urban transition (2005), the rapid urbanization of the country has been mainly characterized by a unique process of rural industrialization. The process has been boosted by the government, in some key coastal regions, like the lower Yangzi Delta or the Pearl River Delta and has created a particular landscape of scattered industrial areas and new settlements surrounding dense urban areas. This new spatial structure has merged with the legacy of the previous socio-economic system including agricultural activities, rural villages and ribbon developments.

For almost two decades, this model has reduced the pressure of mass migration towards the city centre, improving the living and economic conditions of large parts of

the rural population in the coast. Yet, at the same time this has produced several social and environmental problems denying the rural origin of these areas in transition. These areas have experienced the uncontrolled impact of pollution from a chaotic industrialization process and later on an increasingly urbanisation featuring a massive application of relocation schemes for farmers, determining unrests and high level of social resistance due to perceived unfair compensation treatments.

This trend, although embedded in the specific Chinese institutional setting and largely shaped by ad hoc top-down policies, can be associated with the Asian phenomenon of the industrialised/urbanised countryside, elsewhere addressed as “desakota”, an Indonesian word combining the term for villages, “desa”, and town, “kota” (McGee 1991). This pattern relates to zones characterized by high population density, rapid growth of non-agricultural jobs, labour mobility and mixed, sometimes chaotic, land use (Xie et al. 2007).

Today urbanisation continues unabated, moving from the coast to the West, and being driven by policies aiming at repositioning China from a purely manufacture-based country to an increasingly service and knowledge-based one. This transition is characterised by the flourishing of new industrial parks and new residential areas, for allocating the rising Chinese middle class.

Primary activities are losing appeal and profitability especially if located within complex city-region systems, whereby the urban exerts a strong influence on the surrounding areas. A part from the evident land use conflicts inherent in the process of “metropolitanisation”, this generates an alteration of the peri-urban livelihood, elsewhere associated with the concept of “de-ruralization” (Bryceson 1996), resulting in social costs that very often are not accounted in the development process (Verdini 2014). The

acknowledgement of the overall loss at the fringe, that is not limited to farmlands, might highlight the existence of other systems of resources, like place-based economic activities, environmental assets or cultural and social capital, embedded in unique systems of organic rural settlements, today threatened by the urban growth.

Even if the conversion from rural to urban land has been massive, and still ongoing, some important areas have been left over and a journey through those areas would reveal today that new forms of peri-urbanity are slowly growing at the fringe of the city in China. This trend, in some cases, seems to align to the western trend where, since the 90s, the rediscovery of different dimensions of rurality, labelled as post-productivist, around the city has played an important role in the diversification of some rural economic activities, such as the ones related to tourism and leisure time, or to the production of specific local food (Arnason et al. 2009).

These resources can play an important role for the future of China, strengthening prospective urban-rural synergies and configuring the Chinese fringe as a distinct and dynamic spatial organization. Thus the studying of these dense “rural” regions, part of complex and polycentric urban systems, will eventually contribute to the understanding of new emerging Asian Mega-city Regions (Qadeer 2000).

Actors, Dimensions and Management Challenges

Actors

There is still a clear demarcation line between those who resides in rural areas and those who are registered as urban citizens in China. As it will be described in the next session about the different “dimensions” of the rural fringe this line is reinforced by the residential “hukou” system, whose belonging determines a different status and access to welfare’s benefits.

However, if we focus on rural households, the actors located at the rural fringe appear to be difficult to categorize. Besides their statistical classification as rural households their livelihoods might derive from more or less profitable agricultural activities or from a variable combination of rural and urban jobs. Their status and their diverse pattern of income form an unexpected variety of social formations.

The penetration of the capitalism form of production into Chinese agriculture has reshaped the once homogeneous peasants class, thus determining a growing divide between those increasingly working as capitalist agricultural producers and those gradually entering a condition of proletarianisation (Zhang and Donaldson 2010). This process, which increasingly relies on the commodification of rural labour force, can partly explain the trend of in-migration toward the fringe areas for agricultural purposes.

In addition to this the fringe can be a suitable, temporary and affordable location for the “floating population”, mainly composed of the traditional migrants holding a rural hukou, finding job opportunities in the industrial sectors of the most urbanised part of the country (Zhu 2007). Especially in mega-cities like Shanghai, continuously shaped by inner redevelopments and strongly affected by rising real estate prices, the peri-urban areas have become the favourite destination of the “floating population” (J.Wu 2008), although migrants still prioritize the inner suburbs rather than the outer ones (W.Wu 2008).

Regardless their origin, rural household located at the fringe, might be involved in rural or urban jobs. As long as they are employed, taking advantages of both urban and rural opportunities, they share similar living condition. Once the land is designated as urban their status determines their right to get compensated, creating new disparities

between locals, entitled of land rights, and migrants. The last case is the category more seriously at risk of marginalization, within the growing sector of the urban poor.

Rural households in China accounts today for almost 200 millions and recent estimations suggest that the total amount of dispossessed farmers will overpass soon 70 millions, at an annual rate of 2.5 - 3 millions of farmers (Ran 2012). On the other hand the urban population from 2000 to 2010 was growing by almost 20 million per year, with the official statistics declaring that overall the proportion of people living in urban areas rose from 17% to almost 53% between 1978 and 2011 (OECD 2013). As reported in Frassoldati and Li, in the present volume, this figure is very likely to be purely statistic, not considering the contribution of the floating population, de facto living in urban settings, to the extent that in fast-growing regions the rate of people involved in non-primary activities should today exceed the 80%. On the other hand they also argue that, in areas like the Pearl River Delta, the frequent reclassification of town and villages into urban areas, mainly due to political or economic reasons, have determined a unclear figure where most of the new urban residents locates in these mid-ranking urban settings that form the dense Chinese rural regions.

Besides the issue of administrative readjustments, that warns us in considering the official statistics with caution, still the Chinese urban growth implies an important extension of the existing city boundary and new processes of peri-urbanisation, both for residential and industrial development purposes. Taking Beijing as an example, China's metropolises are experiencing a complex urban-rural transition as the peri-urban areas attract temporary migrant residents, as in other dynamic metropolis, showing at the same time a residential demand from growing middle-class groups (Zhao 2012).

Newcomers at the fringe express different housing needs. While the migrants mainly look for affordable temporary accommodations, the new Chinese middle class seeks for spacious low-density houses as reported in Sturzaker and Law in the present volume. Low or high density gated community (western) style of urbanisation is also flourishing (Wu 2007). Regardless the typological preference the recent trend of suburbanization determines an unprecedented socio-spatial fragmentation and polarization at the fringe, as already experienced in other emerging countries like Argentina, Brasil, Indonesia, etc.

However, what is still almost unknown in literature is the contribution of the new Chinese cities (and citizens) in shaping a more mature and articulated demand of peri-urban areas, as already experienced in the developed world. City demands not just new space for development (either affordable or elitist) but also quality rural places at the fringe for spending their leisure time, for practicing tourist activities during the weekend, for purchasing local products, etc.

As reported in Wang, in the present volume, attempts to study this emerging trend and its implications are rather scattered today in China, while probably the south Jiangsu Province represents one the most suitable region to start with. Historically characterised by a rich agricultural tradition and a peculiar development of rural villages, some of these water towns have naturally become the object of interest of a growing domestic tourism, like in the case of the water towns of Tongli and Zhouzhuang, near Suzhou, or Zhujiajiao in the suburbs of Shanghai. Similarly some agricultural productions in peri-urban areas have been converted into organic for feeding a niche but increasingly urban demand of quality food, mainly driven by the international expat community and the wealthy

Chinese bourgeoisie, like in Dongshan Peninsula in Suzhou, in the residual agricultural areas of East Pudong or in Chongming Island, both in Shanghai.

Thus this trend adds another component to the complex and multifaceted Chinese fringe as the figure of the urban citizen (in some cases urban tourist) reshapes the agricultural activities in a more service-oriented or quality oriented manner, asking for a contemporary reusing of the existing built environment (from single rural houses to entire historic rural villages) and open fields, and for and not just for land-consuming activities.

In this brief introduction we have prioritised the contemporary emerging societal figures whose needs and demands will mostly determine the spatial configuration of the rural fringe of urbanising China. We have purposely avoided mentioning those who act on behalf of the state (policy makers, local officials, local cadres, etc.), although their beliefs and values, such as their behaviours, might determine as well different pattern of fringe development in light of the complex bureaucratic Chinese administration system and the relative high level of local autonomy. This is because an important, but often underestimated factor, to consider, is the performance benchmarking that they have to achieve, to fulfil their political duties, which are still mainly based on pure economic growth paradigms, leaving so far limited space for redesigning the fringe of Chinese cities, such as the overall city transformation, based on principles of urban quality. These aspects, although extremely important would require had hoc investigations. For this reason they will not be accounted in this volume even if their implications have to be considered in outlining the challenge that future planners, urban designers and architects will face in the future when they will be asked to deal with the fringe.

Dimensions

Studies regarding the rural-urban fringe in the West have been mainly attempted to consider the fringe from a multiplicity of different functional dimensions. This has led, for example, Gallent et al. (2006) to identify the main planning challenges according to five typologies of fringe: historic, aesthetic, economic, socio-cultural, ecological.

In this book we will mainly focus on the institutional constraints, namely the rules of the games that shapes the planning practices at the fringe, due to their overwhelming importance in the current debate on Chinese urban issues and institutional reforms. This will not prevent us to relate the specific Chinese institutional challenge to recurring and emerging dimensions, as they are perceived by the main actors or by the dominant political discourse. However, lack of systematic and comparative studies within China, would easily bring us to an easy but dangerous shortcut. The risk would be to conceive the Chinese fringe with a western bias assuming a similar pattern of development for both contexts. To avoid this hereinafter the institutional dimension of the Chinese fringe will be described and the regional dimension will be also taken in account, considering that trends of development at the fringe substantial vary based on geographic location factors (the coast or midland China) and functions played by the Chinese urban networks (mega-cities or medium-sized cities, for example). Eventually some emerging dimensions will be depicted, especially those related to raising environmental concerns and new economic dynamics.

Urban land in China constitutionally belongs to the state and is given in concession to urban households for a limited period of time, according to the prevalent land use. Rural land, on the other hand, is collectively owned, belonging to the rural communes, who allocate land among the member of the community based on egalitarian principles (Hsing 2010). In urbanising China the rural fringe is the area where the

conversion from rural to urban takes place, unless prohibited by specific planning restrictions, which aim to limit city size and preserve cultivated land (CPGPRC 1999).

Mechanisms for rural conversion into urban include the designation of areas of new development for residential or industrial purposes and the compulsory purchasing of the rural land from the State for public interest, based on the application of compensation schemes for dispossessed farmers. After the expropriation the land can be sold to private developers.

Due to the ambiguity of property rights, determined by a dual system of land tenure, Chinese urban development is largely characterised by increasing forms of grievances from peri-urban farmers, during the process of forceful urbanization. This is primarily due to the perception of unfair compensation that has led, in the last years, to social unrests such as more articulated forms of resistance (Li and O'Brien 2008).

This is one of the main critical points of the current urban growth model which extracts the main resources, for its reproduction, from the capital gain obtained by selling land in the vigorous primary land market deducting the very marginal farmers' compensation. Moreover, the Chinese devolution process, not accompanied by adequate resource transfer from the centre, necessarily increases the appetite of city financing systems, resulting to be highly land-consuming (Man 2011). Thus local officials and policy makers, as mentioned before, play a fundamental role in fuelling a revenue seeking urban development model, often resulting in unsustainable and unfair solutions.

Some steps ahead have also been taken to establish a fairer system to protect farmers' land rights (CPGPRC, 2007), but only full tenure security is regarded as a way to reduce the widespread phenomenon of discretionary allocation of land curbing the risk of individual appropriation of the urbanisation capital gain (Ding 2007). Peri-urban

farmers, moreover, affected by the urban development process, might benefit for more or less rewarding compensations, in monetary or urban real estate form (Zhao and Webster 2011). They eventually become urban citizens, not being exempted from problems bounded to their new status. The issue of the “passive urbanisation” has been in fact well explored pointing out how the compensation doesn't acknowledge the deprivation of farming skills often pushing the new citizens in the marginalised job sectors of the cities (He et al. 2009).

During the 80s and 90s the fringe agricultural landscape has been transformed by the so-called industrialization of the countryside, driven by the township enterprises. Advantages (mainly social) and disadvantages (mainly environmental) have been already discussed. Since the mid of the 80s moreover the effort of the country to move fast from a purely manufacture-based economy to a knowledge based one materialised in the establishment of several new science parks, largely located at the urban fringe. The science park aims in primes at creating development zones and new jobs (Zeng 2012) although very often it has assumed the form of a property-led residential investment. This is why new towns or new districts, increasingly mixed and diversified, appear, creating a magnet for high-profit industries, research institutions and real estate developments (Hsign 2010).

The last decade has finally witnessed, at least around the main mega-cities, a wave of residential development for the growing Chinese middle class determining, as in the West, the needs for out-to-town retail centres, new infrastructures, dedicated services, etc. Yet in the periurban areas of the fast-growing regions of China agricultural activities are still practiced. While the number of employees in the primary sector quickly declined in the last years, most of Chinese cities (a part extreme cases like Shanghai or

Shenzhen) still rely on their own regional production with a relative high “Self-sufficiency ratio”, namely the quota of local food consumed against the overall city food consumption (Lang and Miao 2013).

Besides the agricultural output transformation and the management system innovation, due to the changing pattern of consumption of the new Chinese urban citizens (Huang 2011), the whole rural economy, especially at the city fringe is changing. Multifunctional agriculture is flourishing together with attempts to raise the quality of food production, but overall rural tourism can be regarded as one of the main emerging and successful complementary activity to partially alleviate the condition of decline that still characterised the Chinese countryside (Zeng and Ryan 2012).

These trends happened frequently in China but not everywhere with the same intensity due to the regional unbalance of the country. Thus it seems fundamental to introduce a geographic dimension or the lens of the regionalist approach to look at how the fringe can be conceived in different areas of the country. Ultimately the goal is to restrict our attention to the rural fringe of specific areas of urbanising China, as mentioned in the title of this book, where distinct regional economic paths, spatial planning issues, environmental and societal challenges can be partially assimilated (Wheeler 2002). The goal is not to foster quantitative comparative studies but to provide examples able to catch, as much as possible, the current (and quickly mutating) situation of the Chinese fringe.

A useful study to start with and to determine a criteria to diversify the rural China is the critic of the policy called “building a new countryside” from Long et al. (2010). From a geographical perspective they argue that the national policy aimed at modernising the agricultural production doesn't take in account different levels of regional

development. If geographic specificity was applied to such a policy, a logical conclusion might be that rural areas within the dense and urbanised east of China are more suitable for diversifying the rural economy, while the western part of China might be more suitable for raising agricultural productivity. However a simple dichotomy East-West is probably no longer suitable to depict the changing urban dynamics of China, especially in light to the great attention to develop inland China from the central government.

Cities performing a positive economic trend, gradually readjusting their employment structure towards the one of the most advanced part of China might all express (if not now, very soon) a new relationship between the urban and the rural areas, experiencing at the fringe similar conflicts and synergies. In addition to the regional pattern of development, the function and the physical dimension of the city might have an important implication in determining different degrees of conflicts or synergies as it will be better explained in the chapter about the intermediate cities from Kern et al., in the present book.

In summary the rural-urban fringe zones, quoting the recent National Urbanisation Plan (2014-2020) are still very much conceived as an area where to improve their planning, development, management and service provision considering the fierce societal challenges (peri-urban farmers, migrants, urban households) directly related to the environmental issues of containing the city growth and preserve the agricultural land surrounding the main cities (SCPRC 2014).

Besides this broad and urgent environmental concern (ecologic dimension of the fringe), the fringe is becoming a place where the diversification of economic activities are taking place, linked to a more mature demand coming from an established or establishing Chinese middle class. In this respect the economic dimension of the fringe

is assuming raising importance, especially when these economic activities are embedded in particular morphologies that retain an historic (original or reinvented) and an aesthetic dimension. Thus the fringe, in the eyes of urban citizens is no longer an “empty field”, but conversely an area that, besides the regional connotation, mobilizes the growing interests of diverse urban stakeholders.

Management Challenges

The main question related to the management challenges of the Chinese fringe has to do primarily with an issue of ownership or, in other words, with whom is in charge of the fringe in a transitional socialist market system. The key problem is that the current trend of urbanisation in China is producing unsustainable sprawling with the well-known associated issue of farmland reduction, particularly fertile in urbanised coastal areas, and typical urban planning problems such as congestion, stress on the provision of suitable infrastructures and services, alteration of landscape, etc. Worldwide urban sprawl is regarded as one of the main planning challenge of both developed and, more recently, emerging countries (Richardson and Bae 2004).

The western experience places increasing attention to the (controversial) way market-based mechanisms can enhance the efficiency of purely regulative approaches in the process of urban growth management, within neo-liberal systems (Van Dijk 2009). In general terms there is a consensus that regulative measures need to be supported by incentives and meaningful stakeholder participative processes in order to reduce the pressure of urban growth in the surrounding open spaces (Bengston et al. 2004).

Studies of peri-urbanisation in China are placing more attention to the conflictive nature of the Chinese system of the governance of urban growth and to the role of government in fuelling sprawl (Zhang 2000). Contradictions arise between the land-

consuming needs of local authorities for supporting their local financing system, that is still mainly based on land-sell and the rigid top-down measures to curb the sprawl, such as provincial quotas to preserve arable lands, planning restrictions for city growth, etc. Tensions moreover arise between the peri-urban citizens affected by the urbanisation and those who handle the urban growth process (from local officials to private developers) due to the perceived corruption inherent in the current planning system. The growing mistrust generates high level of social resistance and increasing costs during whatever implementation of urban projects as Sun and Zhang argue in the present volume.

However, two are the potentials and promising directions to explore in China, in order to reduce these conflicts, coping effectively with these challenges, as it will be better explained in the next session: on the one hand the effort, so far quite unsuccessful, to implement property taxation at the city level thus reducing the appetite of local governments and the risks of growth per se, not bounded to a real demand; and, on the other hand, to test collaborative and market-based approaches for peri-urban planning, thus reducing the level of social resistance and ensuring a fairer system of compensation.

In addition to these two unavoidable issues, embedded in the current institutional model for urban growth, the question is also about what will be the vision of planning and planners for the rural fringe of future of the Chinese cities. Does the fringe have to be conceived as an empty place, reservoir for future residential suburban areas for the rising middle class? Or for new industrial parks or tourist attractions? Or a potential green and open space for raising the overall environmental quality of the Chinese cities?

Policy responses in this respect have been already put in place in the main Chinese cities, for example the programme of development of satellite cities as part of the strategies of the new Shanghai Master Plan (Den Hartog 2011) or the long lasting

(and not quite successful) attempts to implement a green belt in Beijing in most of cases following models already applied in western cities (Tan et al. 2011). However, emerging social practices at the fringe at the Chinese cities, as already mentioned in the previous sessions, bounded to a new urban lifestyle, are demanding for a different fringe, in continuity with the rural legacy of this environment. The policy response in this case has been scattered or, in some cases, inadequate and still driven by quantitative paradigms. Two evident examples, in this respect, are peri-urban agricultural parks and historic villages. The establishment of peri-urban agricultural parks, with the environmental intention of preserving fertile areas relatively close to urban areas, often hides a local wish to create money machine for increasing domestic tourists (Lang and Miao 2013). The speculative intention is even more evident in the case of the rural regeneration of the historic villages of the South Jiangsu Province. While some villages, although retaining some historic characteristics are simply abandoned and, in some extreme cases demolished, other are designated as tourist attractions and, with the justification of the cultural protection, are transformed in small scale Disneyland for week end tourism, and an entry ticket is now charged at their entrance.

Rural-Urban Interactions: Existing Conflicts and Prospective Synergies

The rural fringe in China places dense rural-urban interactions. These interactions might be determined by contentious demands for allocation of land uses or, conversely, by prospective synergies, potentially fostering sustainable development paths at the fringe. The main driver of urban growth has been identified in the dangerous combination between the particular local financing system, strongly dependent on land sell, and the particularly advantageous system of land requisition for public interest, due to the collective land system in rural areas. This led Tao (2012) to advocate for a coordinated

property tax reform and collective ownership reform, capable of reducing abusive land requisition and distorted land leasing (Tao and Xu 2007). However, despite several attempts to employ property tax simulations at the city level so far little has been done.

Instead more margins of action, within the current Chinese planning systems, seems to exist regarding the application of innovative land management systems, as in the case of the land ticket of Chongqing, under the pilot programme for urban-rural development reform of 2007. This experience basically aimed at ensuring higher compensation for peri-urban farmers, through market-based mechanism for land trading, has been framed as a practical attempt to apply collaborative rural planning in China, tracing a promising path for a more socially balanced model of urban growth, as in the paper from Guo and Zhong in the present volume.

Clearly a common argument behind the fierce urban-rural conflicts of the Chinese system of urban growth is the fact that lack of tenure security in rural areas discourages investments in agricultural improvements (Lichtengerg and Ding 2008). In peri-urban areas the situation is exacerbated by the proximity of the urban areas, as frequently happen even in western countries and by the aspiration of peri-urban farmers of becoming urban, achieving eventually better living conditions. However, this unfortunate combination of factors that might reinforce the assumption of a one-way urbanisation model (who can resist the seductress of modernisation) clashes with an emerging and probably still minority trend of alternative rural activities flourishing at the fringe.

Although these rural activities are surviving mainly due to enforced rural land conservation areas, that prevent the arbitrarily conversion from rural into urban, these activities meet specific and growing market demands coming from the city.

The spreading of non-agricultural jobs in peri-urban areas is becoming a reality in contemporary China being comprised of the so-called happy farming houses (rural guest houses or agri-tourism), restaurants, picking fruits activities, such as scattered local handicraft or cluster of local productions. The conservation of rural heritage is becoming a driver of an unprecedented domestic tourism in rural areas. The reorganisation of the production and commercialisation chain of local food is timidly reinforcing new retails and logistic infrastructures for real urban food strategies.

Ultimately this new peri-urban landscape of social practices and economic activities is depicting a new scenario for planners, urban designers and architects to creatively rethink the rural fringe as a fundamental component of the modern Chinese cities.

As we have witnessed in the last years probably the Yangtze River Delta, and in particular the fringe of new globalising cities such as Shanghai and Suzhou are the ideal place to witness these transformations (Wang in the present volume). However signals in this direction come from a multiple variety of growing and changing contexts in coastal China or in the emerging midland urban clusters (The case of Wuhan described by Cheng et al. in the present volume).

Preliminary conclusion

Besides the evident conflicts lying behind the management of the Chinese rural fringe, this introductory chapter has attempted to show prospective synergies of this linkage. Future sustainable development scenarios for the fringe will be determined by the combination of an increasing demand for quality in these areas with successful attempts of institutional reforms aiming at reducing the merely financial need for municipal expansion. In the meanwhile, the way the fringe will be conceptualised, and consequently the way costs and benefits of its development or preservation will be accounted, opens

potential avenues for further research requiring, along the way, in-depth theoretical study or experimentations on real case studies, as shown in the papers here collected. This book is an attempt to shed a light on an emerging broad planning issue, namely the rural fringe management, for the study of sustainable ways for urbanising China.

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