

# The emergence of counter-urbanisation in China: Can it be a pathway for rural revitalisation?

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## ABSTRACT

China has also experienced a phenomenon of counter-urbanisation. Many urban residents have moved to sub-urban and even remote rural areas for living, establishing and operating businesses over the past decade. However, research is scarce on the counter-urbanisation trend in China. This paper investigates the driving forces behind the migration of China's high-and-middle-income groups to rural areas in the Yangtze River Delta region and their impacts on rural villagers and development. The paper contends that counter-urbanisation serves as an important pathway for rural revitalisation. More significantly, China's rural land ownership system facilitates the migration of urban dwellers to rural areas, thereby promoting rural revitalisation while avoiding the rural gentrification observed in Europe and the United States. In light of this, the authors propose a new term "Rural Middle-class Formation" as a Chinese type of "rural gentrification" to achieve common prosperity in both urban and rural areas and to distinguish it from "rural gentrification."

## 1. Introduction

Counter-urbanisation is not a recent phenomenon. Many urban populations immigrated to suburbs and rural areas in the United States, the UK and European countries last century (Bosworth, 2010). Although counter-urbanisation in Western countries is seen as a movement that peaked in the late 21st century, the migration of urban residents to rural areas remains a trend today (Halfacree, 2008). This trend and the associated research on counter-urbanisation have already emerged in other parts of the world, beyond the USA and Europe, with new characteristics. (Crankshaw, 2019; Dilley et al., 2022; Gkartziou & Halfacree, 2023; Jain & Korzhenvykh, 2019). There is still much to explore and understand about counter-urbanisation's ongoing impact on society and culture (Halfacree, 2008), such as rural gentrification (Darling, 2005; Phillips, 1993, 2004).

Counter-urbanisation, which should be seen as an ongoing process rather than a historical event, is an integral part of the urbanisation process reflecting economic development. When the economy grows to a certain stage, cities may face "urban ills", like air and water pollution, high costs of living, and traffic congestion. Since seeking a better life is

human nature, when urban residents face the pressure of work, stress, and inconveniences of cities, they turn their attention to the countryside and consider moving there for an improved quality of life driven by a positive perception of rural life (Halfacree & Rivera, 2012). They are seeking for the rural physical amenities, known as rural idylls (Darling, 2005). However, Haartsen and Stockdale (2018) argue that the local social environment in which new urban migrants feel comfortable and feel they belong to, impacts their decision to become stayers in rural areas even though the rural physical landscapes were the urban migrants' initial aspiration to move to rural areas.

Economic and productive benefits from rural business opportunities, discussed in commercial counter-urbanisation literature (Bosworth, 2010; Bosworth & Finke, 2020; Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018), are another driver. The pursuit of entrepreneurship in rural areas by wealthy urban people has been interpreted and conceptualised with the production side theory of rural gentrification (Phillips, 2005; Stockdale, 2010) is to invest urban capital in lower-cost rural areas to generate higher returns through rent gaps. Nevertheless, it is argued by Bosworth (2010) that commercial counter-urbanisation, a process that involves urban-rural migration and the transformation of rural communities, is

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only meaningful if migratory patterns significantly contribute to the development of rural economies. Moreover, Commercial counter-urbanisation recognises entrepreneurial migrants to rural places as pivotal for rural economic development. The neo-endogenous growth created by commercial counter-urbanisation with the features of enhancing local asserts connecting them to external networks provides more than needed capital beyond endogenous options. This enables rural areas to benefit from urban-rural integration rather than external domination (Bosworth & Finke, 2020).

Counter-urbanisation has already emerged in China. Although China's land ownership system with the characteristics of public and collective ownership instead of private and restrictions on rural land and housing transactions (Kan, 2021; Liu et al., 2023; Zhao, 2019) before 2016 when the separation of the three rights, including rights of

ownership, contract and management of rural land and homestead (Yu et al., 2023), the phenomenon of urban dwellers migrating to live and invest in the countryside has happened since the late 20th century and the beginning of 21st century (He et al., 2012; Kan, 2021; Zhao, 2019). The process of counter-urbanisation in China differs significantly from the mainstream Western literature on the subject due to land ownership systems and political mechanisms. This research on Chinese counter-urbanisation is of global significance as it enriches and expands the global understanding of counter-urbanisation in various systems and norms. The research contributes to bridging the research gap on the emergence and practice of counter-urbanisation across global contexts, particularly translating the phenomenon (Halfacree, 2008) under different land tenure systems.

After 40 years of rapid economic growth, China has created some

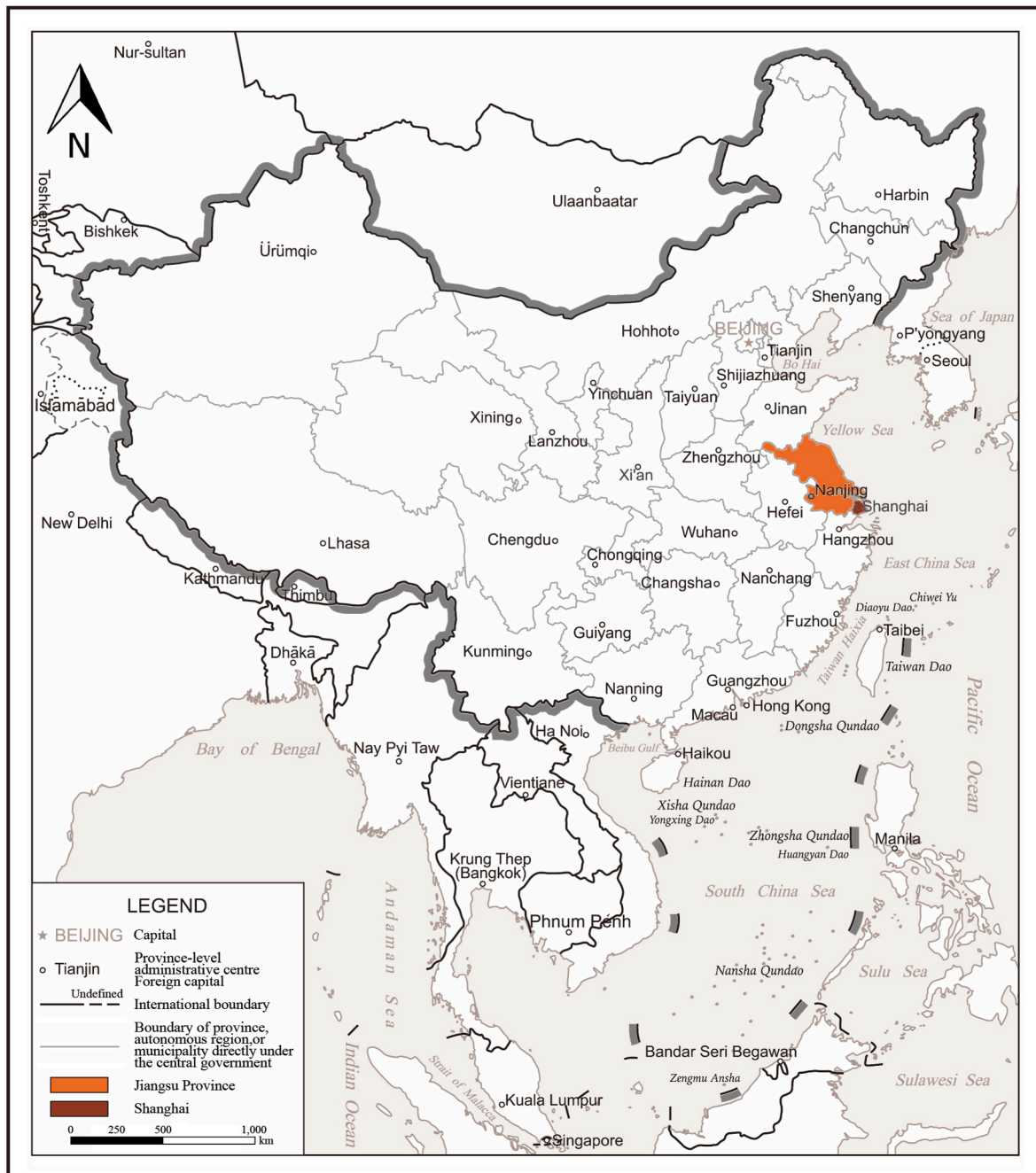


Fig. 1. Location of the research area in China. Source: Design by the authors

300 million high-and-middle-income groups. They too show an inclination toward rural migration. However, China's counter-urbanisation remains little discussed due in part to its system of collective rural land ownership. It is because of this land ownership mechanism that laws and relevant policies have long forbidden non-rural *Hukou* (residential registration) residents from transacting in those lands. Urban migrants to buy or rent properties in rural areas were regarded as illegal actions. Although counter-urbanisation in China has occurred for more than two decades, it has not become a topic of wide discussion and debate in literature.

It thus remains unclear why China's affluent urbanites migrate to rural areas, how their motivations might compare with those of counterparts in Western or other developing countries with private land ownership; what impacts they may have on rural development, and to what extent they can support China's present rural revitalisation strategies. The authors believe that counter-urbanisation under China's political and land ownership system is an important way to address the necessary talent, capital, and technology shortages that are significant for rural revitalisation (Bo & Liu, 2019) and achieve common prosperity in both urban and rural. This study intends to address the above questions by exploring the forces behind Chinese counter-urbanisation and its implications for rural revitalisation and development.

Rural areas in the Yangtze River Delta were chosen as the focus of this study primarily because of the rapid urbanisation occurring alongside counter-urbanisation in the region. The major influx of urban population into these rural areas provides an opportunity to empirically examine the trend of urban dwellers relocating to the countryside.

From September to October 2021, the authors conducted fieldwork in five villages in Jiangsu province and Shanghai, including *Yaluli* village and *Tangli* village in Suzhou, *Tangjiajia* village and *Huashu* village in Nanjing, and one village, *Cenbu* village, in Shanghai (Figs. 1 and 2) (Table 1). A total of 102 structured questionnaires were distributed to

**Table 1**

Basic information and urban migrants of the selected villages.

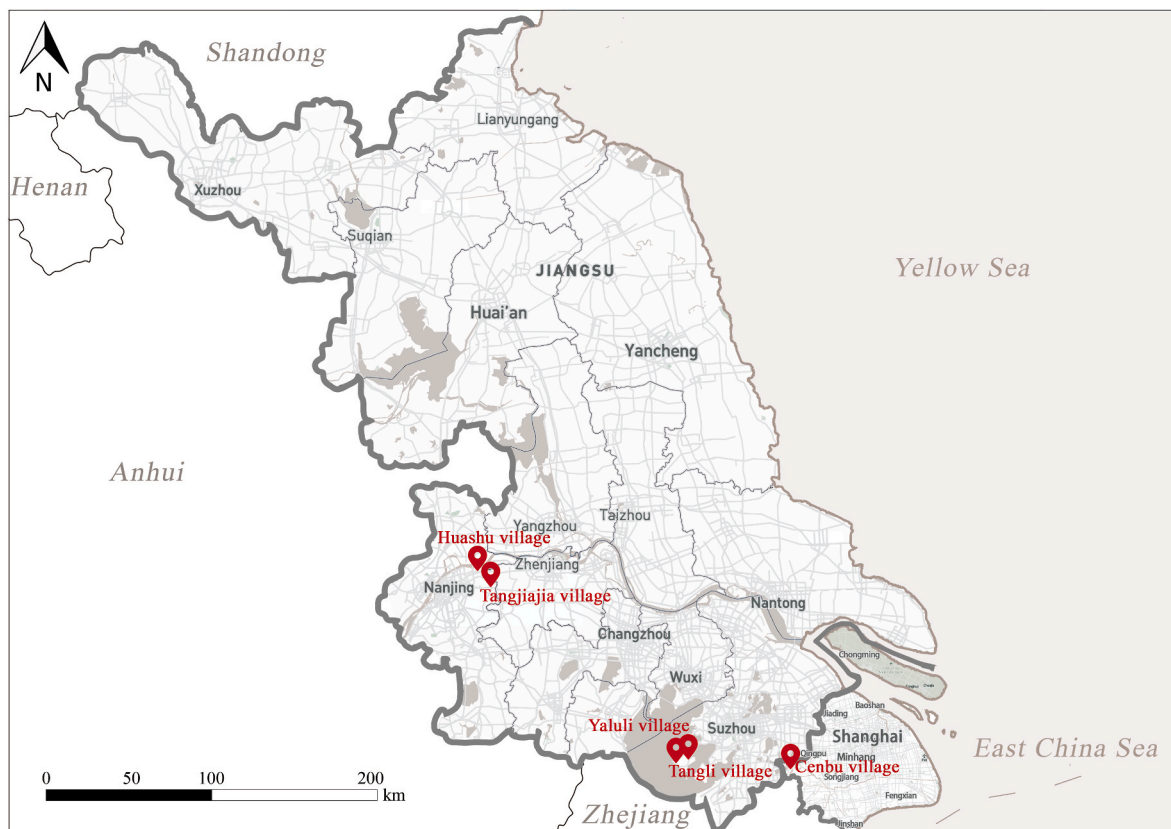
	Local Characteristics	No. Urban migrant households	Percentage urban migrants in the villages
<i>Yaluli</i> village	Natural scenic beauty resources	23	2.2%
<i>Tangli</i> village	Natural scenic beauty resources	17	1.6%
<i>Huashu</i> village	Location; nature and local cultural resources	25	6.5%
<i>Tangjiajia</i> village	Location; special spa resources	28	8.4%
<i>Cenbu</i> village	Location, nature and local cultural resources	56	7.5%

Source: From the survey

village committees, high-and middle-income urban migrants who had settled in these rural areas, and long-standing villagers. 99% of these questionnaires were completed. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with village committees, rural villagers and urban migrants who settled in the villages.

The questions of questionnaires and in-depth interviews for local village committees were designed to identify the approaches to land use right transformation and management mechanisms for contracts between local villagers and urban-rural migrants. The survey of local villagers focused on their attitudes toward the migration of urban residents to their villages. Interviews with newcomers from urban areas focused on their reasons for settling in rural areas, activities after moving, and approaches to contracts for rural properties.

A random sample survey was conducted with local villagers. The authors walked around the villages to find available participants. Interviews with village committees followed the initial questionnaires. It



**Fig. 2.** Location of the five villages in the research area. Source: Design by the authors

usually took half a day to interview one village committee. In some villages, the authors had to visit the local committee two or three times to find the right person and their availability.

It was more complicated to conduct questionnaires and interviews with newcomers to rural villages, as some of them had to commute to cities and towns for work. The authors would like to meet as many urban-rural migrants as possible. To achieve this target, we had to return to the villages several times and on weekends. For example, we visited the villages three times to meet the person who operated the organic farm in Cenbu village.

Younger villagers were more positive about answering and completing the questionnaires than elderly villagers, some of whom may not be able to read. The survey was difficult for elderly villagers, and some refused to answer the questions or complete the questionnaires.

## 2. Literature review

As the authors suggested earlier, counter-urbanisation should be treated as a crucial component of urbanisation, reflecting economic growth. It is human nature to strive for a better life socially, economically, and environmentally. In the process of counter-urbanisation, the predominant perception, at least in Anglo-Saxon countries, is wealthy people going to rural regions, the process of which has generated resource allocation and social re-composition (Halfacree, 2008). Consequently, rural gentrification is an inevitable outcome of counter-urbanisation in Western countries because the process of counter-urbanisation is led by the urban middle class and operated by the more affluent groups (Bosworth, 2010; Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). From this perspective, the main force of counter-urbanisation driven by urban affluent groups can be understood and explained from two main perspectives: consumption-side and production-side. A review of the concepts and debates will provide a framework to conceptualise the phenomenon investigated in this research.

From a consumption-side perspective, counter-urbanisation is a population flow (Ley, 1986) driven by demand. One of the primary motivations for urban migration to the countryside is their pursuit of traditional rural culture and longing for an idyllic lifestyle, including the rural living environment and lifestyle (Phillips, 1993).

Research by Darling (2005) illustrates that urban migrants in counter-urbanisation usually intend to consume the comfortable, tranquil, and pleasant rural scenery. For example, building independent residences on vast lands close to water sources. Moreover, “rural pastoral poetry” or “closer to nature” is considered the most critical driving force for urban migrants to rural areas, including the attractiveness of the rural landscape, clean air, and green spaces (Darling, 2005). This phenomenon is also explained as “greentrification,” (Smith & Phillips, 2001) a process in which the middle class is attracted by cultural preferences for green space consumption and an idyllic rural image. Migration to rural areas allows the consumption of amenities unavailable or challenging to find in cities, such as proximity to the natural environment, rural cultural lifestyles, beautiful natural scenery, and opportunities for outdoor recreational activities like hiking, swimming, fishing, and horse riding. It also includes expenditures on rural handicraft museums, heritage centres, and other rural tourism products (Ghose, 2004). Rural living also provides opportunities for children to understand and interact with nature as an essential part of their education (Ghose, 2004; Jager, 2013, pp. 94–107; Ley, 1986; Loeffler 2007; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017; Nelson & Hines, 2018; Phillips, 1993).

This consumption pattern embodies the theory of symbolic consumption. After the 1990s, consumer culture as the mainstream cultural form in Western society began to spread globally. Under the influence of consumerism, consumption is no longer merely an activity to meet the needs of survival and development but an essential mode for individuals or groups to express themselves and establish their identity (Warde, 2014). They consume not only the use value of commodities but also pay more attention to the cultural symbolic value behind the commodities,

leading to a sense of cultural identity based on symbolic consumption (Warde, 2014). With the rise of consumer culture and the continuous increase in residents’ consumption levels, particularly when rural economic activities, shifted away from a single agricultural production function in the productivity era to a multi-functional one, including service in the post-production era, the demands for leisure and tourism increased (Bosworth & Finke, 2020). Urban capital has then flocked to rural areas to stimulate counter-urbanisation. In this process, rural areas have been called “consumption theatres” (Leiss et al., 2018) and “location commodities” (Phillips, 1993) that can be produced, marketed, and sold to the urban middle class. For example, in the counter-urbanisation process, exquisitely produced rural spaces, including scarce commodities (houses with beautiful scenery) and old commodities (old houses) provide the urban middle class with new leisure spaces and close contact with nature and natural products (Cloke, 1990, pp. 165–181). By consuming these reshaped and exquisitely produced rural images, the urban middle class can consolidate their social status and identity (Cloke, 1990, pp. 165–181; Ghose, 2004).

The migration of urban residents to rural areas has impacts on the development of the countryside while realising their consumption of environment and rural idylls. This can be analysed from the production-side perspective. Different from the consumption side, the production side focuses on the flow of capital rather than people, viewing the countryside as a dynamic space for capital accumulation and emphasising research from the perspectives of capital and profit. Therefore, the “rent gap” is an essential part of it (Darling, 2005; Smith, 1979).

In studying urban gentrification, the “rent gap” theory initiated by Smith (Smith, 1979) refers to the gap between the capitalised actual ground rent under the existing land usage and the expected ground rent level. He argued that when a gap arises between a land’s potential value and its actual existing value, a rent gap would appear (Lai et al., 2021; Smith, 1979). In essence, potential rent and actual rent are both capitalised rents. The difference between them lies mainly in the state of land use, the former being the “highest and best” use, the latter being the current use. When a piece of land is first developed, competition and bargaining between developers and the drive of capitalisation will enable the land to achieve its maximum potential value as much as possible. Consequently, the potential rent and the actual rent are equal (Darling, 2005; Smith, 1979). Thereafter, as assets depreciate and decline in value, the actual rent paid continues to decrease. When a gap exists between the expected potential rent level in that area, a rent gap will arise (Darling, 2005; Smith, 1979). The rent gap means that capital can obtain a higher rental value through investment or development to make a profit. When urban dwellers move to the countryside and invest in rural areas in search of the profitability of rural land, this can be analysed through Smith’s Rent Gap Theory (Smith, 1979).

The loss of the rural population due to urbanisation has two major impacts on the rural landscape. First, a lack of labour force causes agricultural development to stagnate. Second, the source of funds for investment in social infrastructure and basic infrastructure such as road construction and sewage treatment technology was also limited, bringing rural areas to a stage of lack of investment and declining land real value (Uysal & Sakarya, 2018).

Rural areas have a decreasing proportion of agricultural output, a gradually hollowed-out population, underinvestment, and a gap between potential and actual land value, the potential for investment returns is high. Investment in real estate, tourism, and other rural ventures cater to affluent urbanites’ rural lifestyle demands and can generate maximum rental income for generous profits (Nelson & Hines, 2018). Declining rural populations reduce demand. Compared to urban centres, rural real estate prices become an “investment slump.” The potential for high capital returns grows as the rural “rent gap” emerges and widens (Phillips, 2004). When the rent gap reaches a certain threshold, enough profit potential exists to attract capital to rural areas as targets for expansion.

### 3. The emergency of Chinese counter-urbanisation

#### 3.1. Background of urban migrants to rural areas

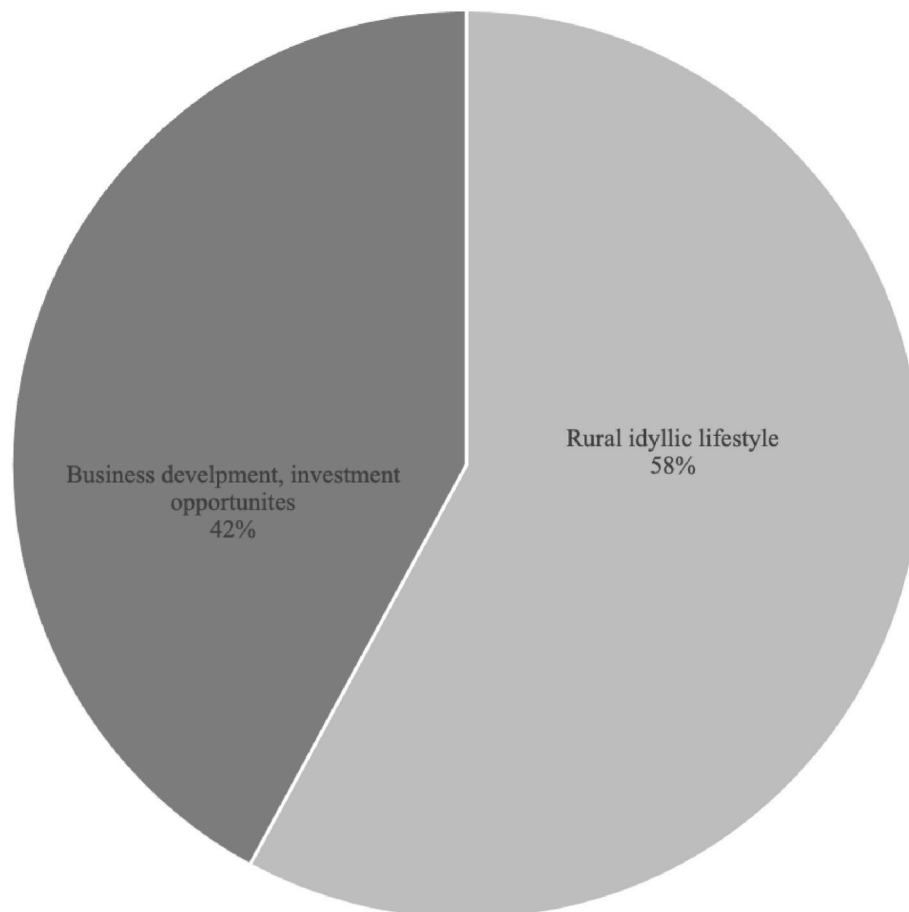
In this study, the targeting of urban high-and-middle-income groups was mainly composed of young and middle-aged individuals who have migrated to rural areas. Among them, the age distribution was concentrated in the following ranges: 21–35 years (26.3%), 35–49 years (52.6%), and 50–59 years (21.1%). Many of them (73.7%) came from the urban areas of Jiangsu province and Shanghai regions, while the remaining 26.3% came from the southwestern and central regions of China. They were attracted to the living environment and standard of Jiangsu and Shanghai's rural areas for the opportunities of a new type of lifestyle and investing in the countryside. One main feature of these counter-urbanisation migrants is that they generally have no stress in their lives and instead focus on achieving spiritual wealth.

It was found in the survey that nearly 90% of the respondents live in rural areas as long-term residents, while the remaining 10% only stayed in the countryside during holidays and vacations. The lifestyle characteristics of these high-middle-income groups in rural areas are mainly divided into two categories: “semi-living, semi-investment” (68%) and pure residence (32%). In subsequent interviews, it was revealed that the former category mainly engages in high-value-added economic activities such as agritourism, organic farming, B&B, and cultural creativity, such as traditional painting, handicrafts and creative art design, pottery design and production, and photography. The latter category consists mainly of retirees who choose to live in rural areas for retirement, remote workers, and full-time employees who commute between the countryside and cities every day.

Due to the existence of China's unique land ownership system, among the urban residents resettling in rural areas who participated in the survey for this research, nearly all signed formal housing rental contracts with the property owners through a legitimate approach. The formal transaction procedures help avoid the risk of conflicts between urban migrants and local villagers regarding property rights. The data derived from our survey of the five villages indicates that 76% of the housing rental market is concentrated in the 5–20 years range. Contracts ranging from 5 to 20 years are common between urban migrants and rural villagers (Liu et al., 2023; Zhao, 2019). It illustrates the mid and long-term preferences of urban-rural migrants.

#### 3.2. The reasons for urban migration moving to rural areas

The initial motivations of urban people moving to rural areas are diverse, but the pursuit of economic gain and quality of life are not contradictory (Halfacree & Rivera, 2012). The data from this survey shows that these two motivations can be combined and reconciled. The motivations for Chinese urban high-and-middle-income groups moving to rural areas can be evaluated from both the consumption side for rural idylls and the production side for entrepreneurial activities. According to our survey, compared to the production side (42%), consumption-related reasons (58%) (Fig. 3) hold a more significant position when urban migrants initially choose to move to rural areas. However, although many initially seek rural living experiences, they pursue business ventures after settling in, embracing a “semi-living, semi-investment” (67%) lifestyle. This represents an “unplanned” entrepreneurial path (Bosworth & Finke, 2020) but reflects the production side's significance in counter-urbanisation. For these migrants,



**Fig. 3.** Main Reasons for migration to rural areas.  
Source: Design by the authors according to the survey

consumption and production motivations together constitute the primary rationale for urban-rural migration.

### 3.2.1. Longing for rural living

The main focus of urban migrants, especially those high-and-middle-income groups on the consumption side is the natural environment and the traditional rural cultural atmosphere according to our investigation.

In contrast to the densely populated and predominantly artificial urban landscape characterised by steel and concrete, the countryside offers wider fields and an ecological environment that embraces nature. This kind of environment is highly attractive to urban-rural migrants. It is similar to that in Western countries where the majority of urban-rural migrants relocate to their selected rural sites to pursue different lifestyles (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). Therefore, rural areas become the destination for urban residents to experience nature's ecological attraction. In this study, most of the surveyed villages have good natural advantages and offer a peaceful and pleasant ecological environment (Darling, 2005). "I was initially attracted to the rural environment and atmosphere before coming here. The good natural environment is the most advantage of rural areas." (Interview with an urban migrant in *Cenbu* village, September 10, 2021). Like this urban migrant, many others expressed their love and longing for the rural environment during interviews. Another urban migrant who moved to *Cenbu* village claimed to have become healthier in fresher rural areas after living in the countryside.

Besides the natural environment, the intangible rural culture is the other important attraction to urban migrants (Ghose, 2004). In modern society, rural culture and urban industrial culture are relatively opposed. Under the impact of modernisation and industrial culture, the rural "paradise" allows many urban residents, especially those high-and-middle-income groups to consider the countryside as their spiritual home. They move to rural areas to appreciate the essence of nostalgia and satisfy their rural sentiments, including folk and agricultural cultures. As pointed out by an urban migrant "the roots and soul of Chinese people are in the countryside. When they want to escape urban pressure, the countryside is the best choice" (Interviewed in *Huashu* village, September 9, 2021).

In addition, during subsequent interviews, it was found that providing opportunities for children to grow up in the natural environment and traditional culture is also important to them. It is a type of child-led migration to rural areas (Haartsen and Sochdale 2018). Richard Louv's book "Last Child in the Woods" (2008) discusses nature-deficit disorder, indicating that many children today face a range of behavioural and psychological issues due to limited exposure to the natural environment. Therefore, an increasing number of urban residents prefer their children to have early exposure to the natural environment. In the field survey, two respondents (Interviewed in *Cenbu* Village, on September 10, 2021) mentioned that they believe the living environment in *Cenbu* Village can provide a better education for their children. Ecologists and other artists who also move from urban areas to the village organise activities for children to learn about plants and insects or recite classics to experience traditional culture. They believe that children getting closer to nature can open their horizons, unleash their instincts, and grow up healthily. It is common to see pictures of children playing on the rural village paths, fields, and courtyards on the social media of these urban migrants after establishing a social media connection with them by the authors.

### (2) Considerations for employment and investment in rural areas

Investment opportunities and rental prices are key concerns on the production side and are commonly considered by urban residents when settling in rural areas. Nearly all interviewed urban migrants indicated that rental prices in villages are much lower compared to urban housing prices. It is also found by Liu et al. (2023) that some urban-rural migrants take advantage of rent disparities to live comfortably without

working by renting out expensive urban homes and then renting relatively cheap rural housing. Reasonable rental costs provide investment opportunities for urban high-and-middle-income groups in rural areas. Investing in rural areas aligns with Smith's "rent gap" theory (Smith, 1979), which suggests that due to the decline in agricultural production value and rural depopulation, the actual value of rural areas is significantly lower than their potential value. Investing in rural areas allows urban high-and-middle-income groups to fulfil their desire to consume traditional rural spaces and maximize potential rental income. In this process, affordable rent plays a crucial role. For example, it is known that eight to nine years ago, the rental price for a detached farmhouse in *Cenbu* Village, Shanghai, was between 15,000 and 20,000 yuan per year. Although the rental price for a detached farmhouse in *Cenbu* village has risen to around 30,000 yuan now while continuing to increase, it remained much more affordable and attractive compared to that in urban areas. A resident from *Tangjiajia* village, Nanjing, told the authors that even though the rent increased by 10% annually, it was still much cheaper overall than renting in the city. Moreover, her restaurant business was thriving and profitable. This indicates that the investment of urban migrants in rural areas can maximize potential land rental income, allowing them to profit from operating businesses and contribute to the diversified development of the rural economy.

### 3.3. Activities of urban migrants in rural areas

#### 3.3.1. Consumption side

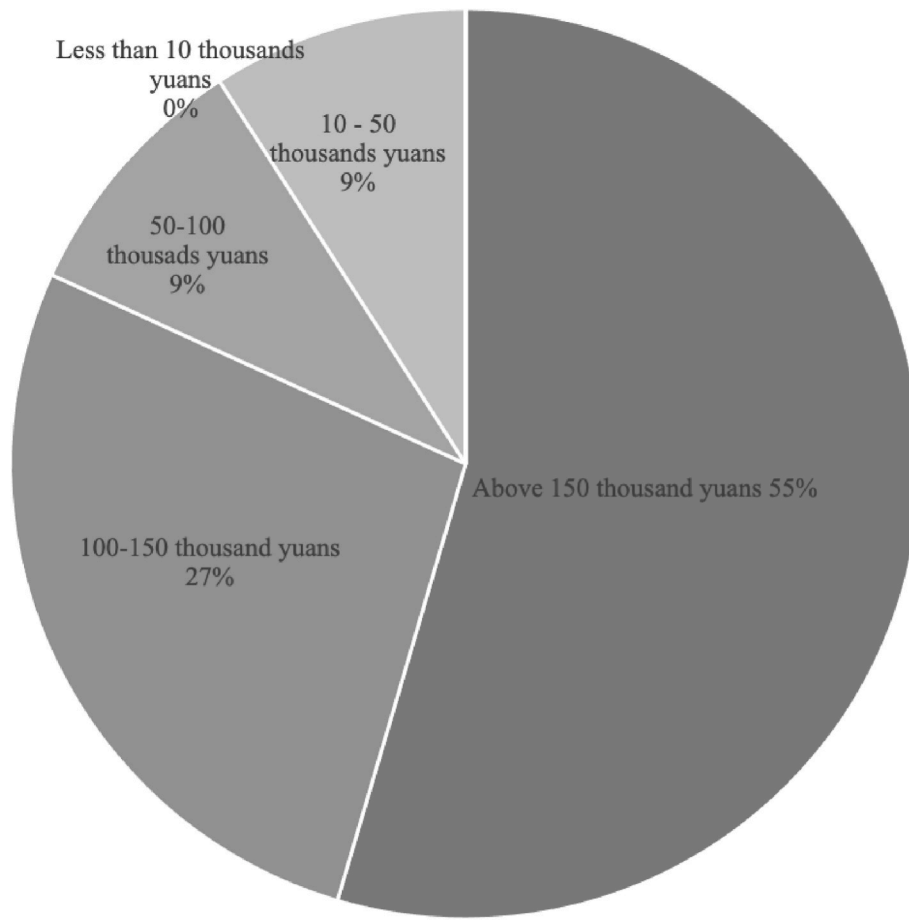
##### (1) Preservation and restoration of living spaces and housing

It was found in the investigation that nearly all urban to rural migrants had made efforts to protect and restore their living spaces and housing in the countryside, which often incurs high costs. According to the survey, 55% of urban migrants spent more than 150,000 yuan on housing improvement and renovation, far exceeding their annual rent (Fig. 4). When urban migrants settle in rural areas, they usually renovate and transform depreciated and dilapidated houses to improve living comfort (Loeffler & Steinicke, 2007). Some urban migrants have also combined the natural features of rural areas with their professional knowledge and skills, applying them to the renovation of houses or courtyards.

##### (2) Optimising rural ecological environment

Urban migrants feel a stronger sense of ownership and belonging to both the rural physical and social environment (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). The ownership and belongings contribute to the willingness of many urban migrants to improve the local ecological environment, such as greening the vegetation after settling down in the village. Since the rural pastoral poetry or the desire to be close to the natural environment is considered the most significant motivation for urban residents to settle in the countryside, they tend to protect and beautify the green natural environment to maintain the unique appeal of rural areas (Uysal & Sakarya, 2018). Subsequent interviews revealed that urban to rural migrants primarily focused on improving the environment around their houses. "I chose to live in the countryside because of the ecological environment, so I improve the environment around my house to enhance my own experience." (Interviewed an urban migrant in *Tangli* village, October 8, 2021). Additionally, as most of these urban migrants adopt a semi-living, semi-investment lifestyle, improving the rural natural environment can attract more consumers. For example, an urban migrant operating in a B&B in the countryside stated that he believed enhancing the surrounding environment of their homestay could attract more tourists and generate more revenue (interviewed on October 8, 2021).

Furthermore, these urban migrants also actively express their opinions and suggestions regarding environmental governance in the



**Fig. 4.** Spending on housing improvement.  
Source: Design by the authors according to the survey

villages. They participate in discussions on rural revitalisation plans and utilise their expertise in ecology, landscape planning, and design to question and provide suggestions on schemes that are detrimental to the environment. For example, during the survey it was found that new residents from urban areas in *Cenbu* village opposed the local government's proposal for hardened riverbank reconstruction, considering it harmful to ecological conservation. The urban migrants expressed their opposition on social media, stating, "Full-scale hardening of riverbanks causes significant damage to the river's ecology and has been gradually abandoned in many developed countries. Regrettably, it's still being promoted in the outskirts of Shanghai!" (Group WeChat of the urban migrants) Their opposition drew attention from the government, and they were invited to participate in subsequent meetings, engaging in a multi-stakeholder negotiation with the government, village collective, and villagers. Together, they reached a compromise solution that could protect the village's ecological environment to some extent. These urban migrants continue to pay attention to the river's reconstruction and express their opinions on environmental governance in the countryside on social media.

### 3.3.2. Production side

#### (1) Introducing and promoting organic farming

From a production side perspective, the investment of urban migrants in rural areas can significantly impact the development of the rural economy and local practices, it is a meaningful pattern of commercial counter-urbanisation (Bosworth 2020). The urban migrants have impacted the transformation of the original rural resources and

spatial structure through capital investment, promoted the transition of the rural economy, and enabled the rural areas to transform into post-productivism countryside (Phillips, 2004). It is found from this research that due to their investment, rural villagers began to focus on the high value-added production of agricultural producers, the multi-functionality of agricultural and rural resources, in addition to grain production enabling the countryside to exert not only production functions but also cultural and ecological functions. The urban migrants play a positive exemplary role in the local villagers through their investment in organic agricultural production and marketing as well as rural tourism-related businesses, to influence the business ideas and values of the local villagers.

Urban-rural migrants, especially those high-and-middle-income groups with higher education have a deeper understanding and recognition of sustainable development and the 12th Goal of "Sustainable Consumption and Production" in the UN SDGs. When they migrated to the countryside, they rented agricultural land from local villagers and engaged in organic farming.

For example, it was found in the investigation that a few residents in *Cenbu* Village leveraged their profound knowledge of ecology to produce organic agricultural foods. They leased around ten acres of agricultural land in *Cenbu* village to operate their own Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm. They intended to directly connect with urban consumers through green and sustainable agricultural production, allowing urban consumers to purchase higher quality, safe, and healthy agricultural products directly from the local countryside.

The CSA farm produces organic sweet corn, tomatoes, lettuce, celery, cabbage, pumpkins, and zucchini. The products were directly sold to urban consumers through WeChat. The main customers consist of urban

residents in Shanghai. Comparing the prices of the farm posted on WeChat with the prices displayed on the “Freshippo”, which is operated by Ali and Dingdong (Cayman) (Table 2), the organic products’ prices of CSA farms in *Cenbu* village are generally lower. Therefore, even though organic products of the farm are relatively more expensive than conventional agricultural products, they still have a very good market.

Building upon the cultivation and sale of organic vegetables, the operators of the CSA farm have extended their business chain. They address the current lack of full understanding and knowledge of ecology and sustainability among urban and rural residents on a large scale, as well as the limited ecological and agricultural knowledge among some organic enthusiasts or small farmers. In response, the operators of the CSA farm further develop value-added businesses such as farm visits, environmental education, and ecological farming technology training. They organise events for children from cities to learn about honeybees and how to coexist harmoniously with them. They also organise night-time tours in *Cenbu* village to introduce people to nocturnal insects. Through ecological farming practices and related educational activities, they have disseminated their knowledge of ecology while making some income.

The other urban-rural migrant who ran a B&B (homestay) has established a natural agricultural planting experiencing park. Besides providing organic farm-to-table meals in the B&B, he also allowed customers to enjoy the pleasure of sowing, harvesting, and fishing, providing a hands-on agricultural experience. This enhances the added value of agriculture.

## (2) Rural Tourist-related Activities.

In addition to organic agriculture, the low investment but potentially high return in rural tourist development has attracted urban migrants to invest in this promising industry as proposed by the “rent gap” theory (Smith, 1979) to meet the needs of urban consumers in areas such as rural holidays. The industry, which allows them to maximize the potential rent benefits and obtain substantial profits, has been a popular business in rural China. As discovered during investigation in *Cenbu* village (Fig. 5), *Huashu* village (Fig. 6), and *Tangjiatjia* village (Fig. 7), many urban migrants have leased idle rural houses to operate businesses, including cafes, bubble tea shops, health clubs, B&B and creative design workshops.

Among these activities, the most common business that urban-rural migrants engage in when venturing into rural areas is rural B&B. The unique environmental advantages of rural areas attract urban white-collar workers who expect to escape the hustle and bustle of cities and release stress by experiencing a slow-paced life in the countryside during weekends and holidays. As one interviewee mentioned, “We usually have urban visitors coming to our village. Because the rural environment is good and comfortable, staying in rural B&B for a couple of days in holidays has become a trend” (Interview with an urban migrant, *Tangjiatjia* village, September 8, 2021). Rural B&Bs are becoming popular in rural China. Such phenomenon happened in our research areas too, for example, the *Laihui* B&B in *Yaluli* village, the *Piaomiao* B&B in *Tangli* village, the *Zuolin Youshe* B&B in *Tangjiatjia* village, and the *Shan Er Yi Zhai* B&B in *Cenbu* village. These were all invested in and operated by urban migrants. Although some urban-rural migrants in *Tangjiatjia* village excessively symbolise and modernise the decoration of rural B&B

with urban aesthetics, many urban migrants do not pursue elaborate designs. Instead, they follow principles of craftsmanship, locality, and nature, making their B&B more closely connected to the surrounding environment and the rustic charm of the countryside. Additionally, these B&B not only provide accommodation services but also develop health resorts, unique farm-to-table dining experiences, vegetable and/or fruit picking activities, personalised tour guiding services, and children’s recreational programs. Through online marketing promotion and the influence of internet celebrities, many B&Bs have gained popularity, attracting numerous young consumers eager to experience rural life. This revitalises previously dormant rural areas and further drives rural development.

The food and beverage businesses are the other type of activity invested in and operated by urban migrants when moving to rural areas, including private special restaurants and cafes. The purpose of urban migrants engaging in the food and beverage businesses is due to their belief that the existing dining options in rural areas are concentrated in farmhouse restaurants, which suffer from homogeneity and lack of innovation despite showcasing a strong “rural flavour.” Their operations of speciality private restaurants were proposed to provide tourists with more dining choices (Interview with an urban migrant in *Tangli* village on September 28, 2021).

The peaceful environment and local folk culture have attracted many artists and skilled craftsmen to establish their studios in rural areas. For example, the *Aotu* Slow Printing Art Studio in *Huashu* village offers visual communication design, craftsmanship training, cultural and creative product sales, and art exhibition activities. In addition, *Cenbu* village has the *Daqiangmu* Craft Gift Shop, which specialises in incense-making, fragrance appreciation activities, and the sale of natural handmade crafts. It is the belief of these artists that being rooted in rural areas helps them focus on their creative work and allows them to be inspired by interactions with nature. They revitalise and utilise rural idle houses and renovate them to create their new lives in the countryside.

## 4. Discussion: impacts of counter-urbanisation on rural areas

### 4.1. Positive impacts on rural revitalisation

#### 4.1.1. Boosting villagers’ incomes

##### (1) Increasing income through housing rental

Same to what Western studies explored that the influx of urban to rural migrants for renting or purchasing houses can drive up rural housing and land prices, leading to rapid development in the rural real estate market, it also happens in Chinese political and economic context (Yu and Wang 2011). More than half of the interviewing villagers told the authors that renting out their houses to urban migrants and receiving rental income was an important source. Some villagers mentioned that it was not only themselves but many of their neighbours and relatives who had already moved to urban areas had increased their incomes by renting out their vacant houses to urban migrants in rural areas.

During “Rural Middle-class Formation”, the land ownership system in rural China effectively avoided the negative impacts of rural gentrification while generating property income for villagers. A formal market for rural land and housing transformation was not established experimentally in some regions until recently (Yu et al., 2023). This is mainly because of strict rural land control and related regulations that restrict the direct transfer of rural land rights to anyone outside villages (Kan, 2021). Urban migrants cannot contract or lease land directly from the local rural collective administration by enjoying the same rights as the rural residents (*Hokou* holders) but rent from villagers (Zhao, 2019) through a private transition to reuse idle houses for the businesses of B&B, and food and beverage. The existing household registration system (*Hukou*), which ensures that rural villagers should have necessary living conditions as members of collective bodies and serves as their basic

**Table 2**  
Prices of organic agricultural products.

	<i>Cenbu</i> CSA farm	Freshippo	Dingdong
Sweet corn	25 yuan/kg	24 yuan/kg	28 yuan/kg
Celery	24 yuan/kg	33 yuan/kg	31 yuan/kg
Tomatoes	26 yuan/kg	47 yuan/kg	36 yuan/kg
Mixed vegetables	25 yuan/kg	44 yuan/kg	34 yuan/kg

Source: Research by the authors



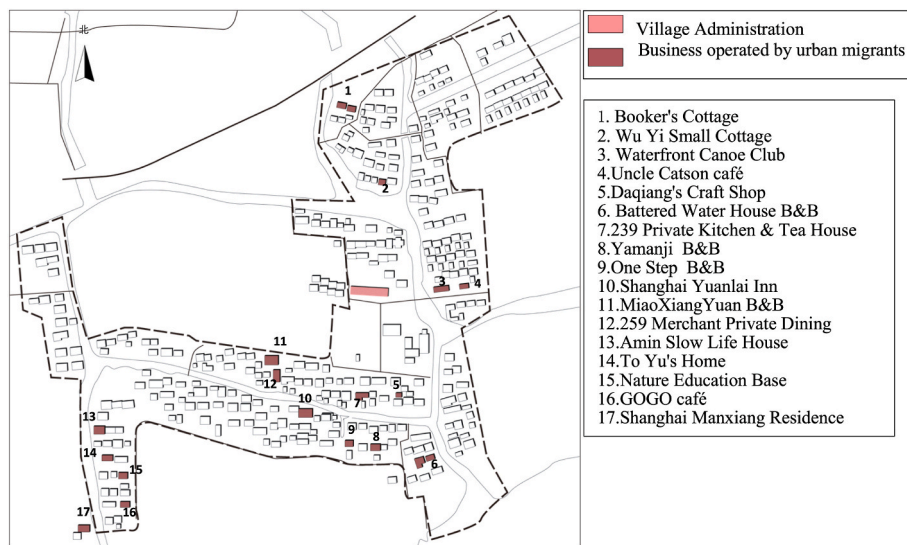


Fig. 5. Businesses operated by urban migrants in Cenbu village.  
Source: Design by the authors according to the survey

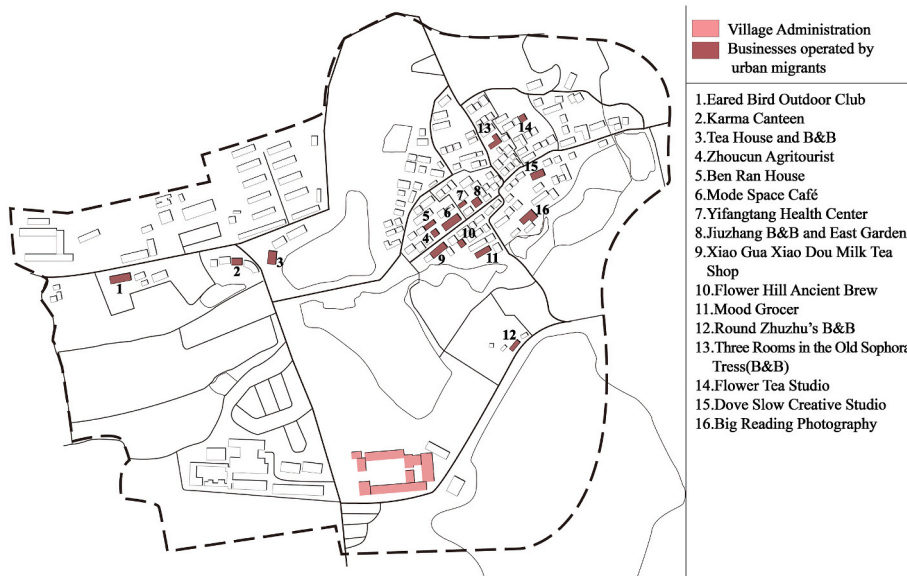


Fig. 6. Businesses operated by urban migrants in Huashu village.  
Source: Design by the authors according to the survey

welfare system, allows villagers to negotiate rental matters with urban migrants when signing relevant agreements for renting their idle rural houses after they are moving to urban areas. This system helps meet the expectations of local villagers in terms of rented prices. The authors found in this research that in recent years, driven by the trend of urban migrants settling down in the countryside, rental prices of land and houses have continued to rise rapidly, with an annual growth rate of around 10%. The system has also prevented the type of rural gentrification that has caused rural villagers in other countries to lose the land and housing they own when urban populations move to the countryside, which often results in disruptions to the rural social fabric (Yu and Wang 2021). The Chinese urban migrants, who often become disadvantaged in disputes with local villagers, are not typical gentrifiers. At the same time, local villagers are not typical victims displaced by the gentrification process (Zhao, 2019).

Besides the house rent, the investment and development of the tertiary industry in rural areas by urban migrants provide employment

opportunities for villagers to improve their income structure (Nelson & Nelson, 2011). The business development and investment in rural areas by the urban migrants offer job opportunities for some villagers to be employed locally instead of travelling to urban areas. This phenomenon helps slow the flow of people from rural to major urban centres. It addresses the demands of appropriate human capital for rural endogenous development (Stockdale, 2006) and promotes local urbanisation to achieve relatively balanced demographic and economic growth between urban and rural areas, and between regions.

The jobs that the local villagers take in the businesses operated by the urban migrants are mainly those related to agriculture such as planting and managing crops on organic farms, receptionists and/or cleaners in B&B, and cook assistants in restaurants. Depending on the circumstances, wages are paid on a daily or monthly basis. One interviewee (interviewed an urban migrant, Huashu Village, October 9, 2021) stated that during the peak tourist season, she hired local villagers to do cleaning and food preparation jobs with wages of around 80–160 yuan

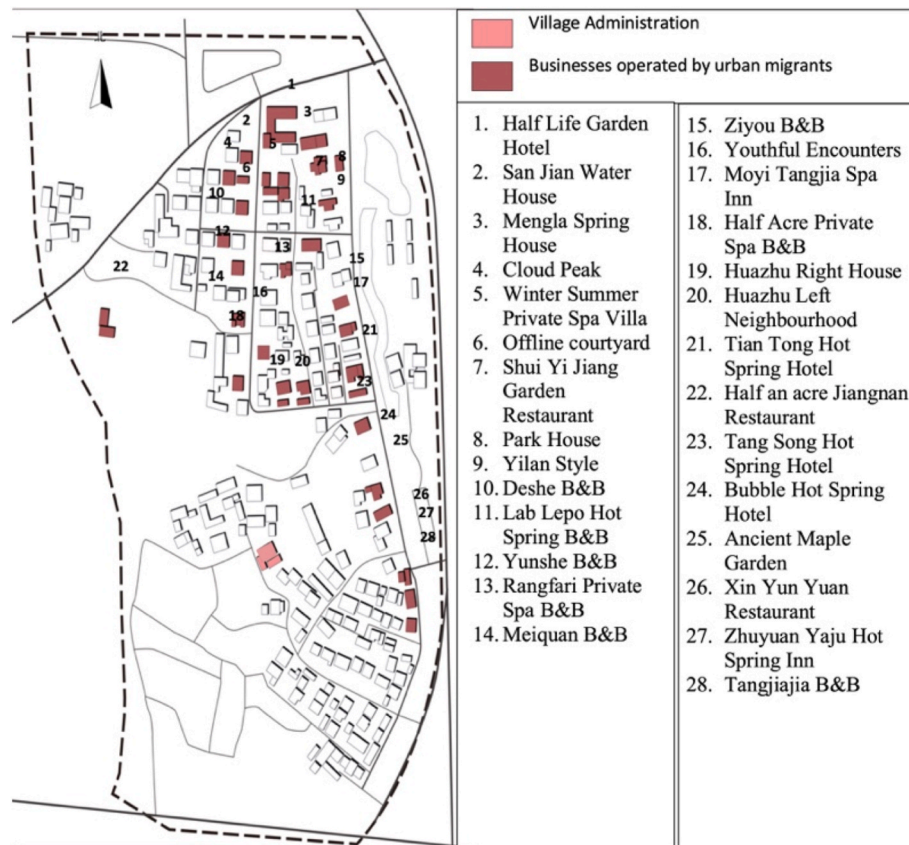


Fig. 7. Businesses operated by urban migrants in Tangjiajia village. Source: Design by the authors according to the survey

per day or a monthly salary of around 3500 yuan. The comparable wages to those in the city attract some villagers to work on their days off or during agricultural downtime. This is common in many villages. An elderly villager from *Cenbu* village (interviewed on October 12, 2021) mentioned that she uses her spare time to work on farms operated by an urban migrant to earn additional income. Her responsibilities include sowing seeds, watering, and weeding. She works from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. with an income of 100 yuan per day. Additionally, a young villager currently working at a B&B (interviewed at *Huashu* Village, on September 9, 2021) told the authors that although his wages in the village were nearly 1000 yuan lower than in the city, however, he preferred to work in his village because he did not have to rent another house and was close to his parents. According to statistics from relevant websites, driven by the trend of urban migrants going to the countryside and the surge in self-operated B&B and rural restaurants by villagers, *Huashu* village alone created more than 100 jobs in 2020.

## (2) Inspiring local villagers for diversity developments for income increase

The entrepreneurial plans and activities of urban migrants can stimulate new ideas and economic activities, directly contributing to rural economic growth (Bosworth, 2010). More crucially, the businesses invested in and operated by urban-rural migrants have influenced and inspired local villagers to diversify business operations besides agriculture while expanding the market for their agricultural products and promoting the cultivation and sale of organic agricultural products. Urban migrant entrepreneurs influence business performance in rural areas and enhance the rural effective neo-endogenous development to overcome the capital shortage (Bosworth & Finke, 2020).

Local villagers feel uncertain about diversifying their economic

activities, as most are unsure how to go about diversifying or are concerned about unpredictable market forces. The diversified business projects invested in by urban migrants have served as models for local villagers. The experiences of urban-rural migrants have inspired villagers to start different businesses. Moreover, the study found that urban-rural migrants had provided training for local villagers. For instance, the “new villagers” actively helped promote and train villagers in marketing agricultural goods through social media platforms.

Additionally, urban migrants often organise periodic local food markets, such as the *Shui'an* Market and *Dianshan* and Lake Market in *Cenbu* village. They invite villagers to participate in these events by supplying raw ingredients and other related products and services promoting a healthy lifestyle, which is what they select for living in rural areas (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). Sometimes, they also invite villagers to sell homemade agricultural products at these markets. With the help of urban migrants, the markets for villagers’ products have expanded. Agritourism and rural bed and breakfasts represent such rural diversified development.

Our research results show that once the urban migrants achieve substantial income from business ventures, some villagers consider following their examples. Based on their understanding of the rural areas, local villagers are earlier to explore rural culture, renovate houses, and engage in small-scale tertiary sector activities to generate income from new businesses.

The local villagers have also learnt experiences from urban migrants to operate leisure farms such as vegetable and fruit picking bases, farm tours, and tea plantations, combined with dining and recreational activities. A villager from *Yaluli* village claimed, “We have gained more popularity in our village, with an increase in B&Bs and tourists. However, there are still not many decent restaurants available. So, I renovated the first floor of my house into an agritourism facility, offering

visitors the experience of picking and tasting local agricultural products while enjoying local cuisine.” (Interview at *Yaluli* Village on October 8, 2021). The diversity of rural development, especially the development of agritourism benefits Chinese rural villagers by increasing their incomes (Zhang et al., 2020). According to our survey, driven by the experiences of urban-rural migrants, and the encouragement and support from the village collective administrations for villagers’ entrepreneurial endeavours, by April 2020, *Huashu* village had established 15 independent agritourism businesses with nearly 500 visitors daily. The operation of agritourism has resulted in an average annual income of 200,000 to 400,000 yuan per person for villagers. Furthermore, agritourism has created 150 job opportunities for local villagers, with an average annual income of 18,000 yuan per person.

### (3) Understanding and benefits of sustainable consumption and production

The UN Sustainable Development Goal 12 (2015) is about sustainable consumption and production patterns. This includes implementing environmentally friendly management of chemicals by following accepted international standards. It also requires dramatically decreasing their release into the air, water and soil to minimise negative impacts on human health and the environment. Moreover, it means ensuring all people have access to the relevant knowledge and understanding required for sustainable development and lifestyles that are in balance with nature.

The interests of urban migrants in ecological environment protection and organic crops also greatly influenced local villagers in sustainable consumption and production patterns. Although China’s historical agricultural production was organic, the emergence and use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers greatly improved agricultural production efficiency and reduced the hard work of farmers. However, the unrestricted use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers not only caused chemical pollution of cultivated land and surrounding water sources, destroyed the physical shape of cultivated land, but also caused food safety issues. The urban migrants concerned with food safety and pollution on soil, water and air by using chemical fertiliser, their promotion of healthy concepts to local villagers, and the successful operation of organic farms have prompted many local villagers to start cultivating organic agricultural products. Although the scale is small and limited to family operations, it has some impact on sustainable production while extending open income sources for villagers. It was found from the investigation that in *Cenbu* village, organic farm owners adhere to manual weeding and raise rabbits on their farms, using rabbit manure as organic fertiliser. Initially, these practices were not accepted by the villagers who were concerned that these ecological methods would reduce crop yields. However, after the successful operation of the organic farm by the urban migrants, many local villagers discovered that organic farming methods do not significantly reduce yields while increasing higher value. Consequently, they began to emulate this healthy farming method, cultivating and selling organic agricultural products to urban markets and tourists. Even though many products have not yet reached organic standards, it has significantly reduced the use of pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilisers. One interviewee mentioned, “Nowadays many villagers buy organic fertilisers from the farm owners and insist on natural farming and manual weeding in their fields. They sell their organic agricultural products directly to the urban citizens or tourists at relatively low prices, earning income from it.” (Interviewed an urban migrant at *Cenbu* village, on October 12, 2021).

The urban migrants to rural areas have contributed to the development and structure of the rural economy, reduced the waste of idle land and housing, improved the appearance of villages, influenced rural villagers’ sustainable development concepts, and facilitated the return of villagers to their hometowns. These initiatives not only promote rural revitalisation but also help establish public activity communities and social networks revolving around the urban migrants and the original

villagers. According to our survey through interviews with rural village committees and local villagers, the majority of villagers and village committees support and accept the urban migration to their villages.

### 4.2. Contradictions and concerns

However, there are some contradictions and concerns between the urban migrants and the local villagers during their interactions, causing worries among the villagers and urban migrants.

One main concern and contradictions arise from differences in aesthetic preferences. Some villagers, especially the elderly, worry that urban migrants to the countryside will disrupt the rural pastoral atmosphere and rural traditional neighbourhood relationships. Specifically, they fear that the urban migrant may excessively apply their modern aesthetic preferences to the construction and development of rural areas, disregarding the historical and cultural charms of the countryside. However, our investigations and subsequent interviews have shown that the actual situation was not as feared. Since a pastoral lifestyle is what the urban migrant seeks, they are more willing to preserve the “rural flavour” while transforming the rural space without destroying its original charm. Nevertheless, due to the pursuit of modernisation, some villagers, especially young generations, were more willing to transform the village’s dirt roads and old buildings according to urban development standards with steel and concrete. For example, in the process of village river treatment, urban migrants tended to retain natural riverbanks, while local villagers believed that hard riverbanks were more sturdy and ecological riverbanks were not durable. The contradictions between the two sides were later resolved through consultation.

The other concern among the villagers regarding urban migrants is their potential disruption of the “acquaintance society” in the countryside. In China, the rural society is characterised by an “acquaintance society,” which means that the traditional and cultural atmosphere in rural China creates a phenomenon that familiarity becomes significantly important in the countryside. The influx of urban migrants to the countryside for living, work, and entrepreneurship may inevitably increase social mobility in rural areas, leading to social and economic differentiation and potentially disrupting harmonious and peaceful rural life. In this context, some elderly villagers are particularly concerned that the urban migrants would tend to privatise their living space, resulting in little or no communication or harmony with local villagers, thereby damaging the neighbourhood relationships in the countryside. “I have lived in this village all my life, and I also want to maintain it. I am worried that a large number of urban migrants coming to my village will destroy the harmonious atmosphere we have now” (interviewed an elder villager on October 9, 2021).

In addition, housing and land transaction agreements can also bring contradictions and worries to both parties. On the one hand, due to some irregular lease contracts or the lack of clear provisions or permissions in law, some grey areas may sign contracts without legal effect, infringing on the land rights and interests of villagers. Therefore, some villagers worry that irregular land/housing transfers may deprive villagers of their rights to land and their previous residences. To recover their land/housing, they need to go through a long and cumbersome legal process.

On the other hand, because many urban migrants have moved to the countryside and pushed up the rents of rural houses and land, rural housing and land rents have risen rapidly in recent years. To obtain greater benefits and keep up with the rising rent trend, many villagers have shortened the lease term of houses and land between 10 and 20 years which was originally signed 10 years ago to 1–5 years now, to raise rents. As a result, some urban migrants who decide to live and invest in the countryside for a long time dare not invest too much capital or are unwilling to provide technology to villagers, for fear that they will not be able to renew the lease after the lease expires, resulting in a loss-making business. This situation was not only found in our investigation, but it was also a common phenomenon in Chinese rural areas (Liu et al., 2023; Zhao, 2019). Uncertainties and short-term contacts have

weakened the confidence of urban migrants in long-term investment in rural areas (Liu et al., 2023).

## 5. Conclusion

Through empirical research, this study investigates counter-urbanisation in the rural Yangtze River Delta region. It addresses key questions proposed in the introduction and explores the state of counter-urbanisation in China, filling gaps in existing research. Particularly, this research has added knowledge on counter-urbanisation trends and practises in various land ownership systems throughout the world.

It is our view that, as in any country, Chinese counter-urbanisation reflects people's aspirations for an idyllic life. When cities face problems like severe pollution, high costs of living and intense pressure, people seek peace in the countryside, aspiring to a rural "paradise" or pastoral life. In migrating to the countryside, urban residents may view it as an investment opportunity to make profits from resettlement. Based on this consideration, this study examines the motivations and activities of Chinese urban migrants from both the consumption side and production side.

The outcomes of the research show that the counter-urbanisation in China differs from that of its neighbour Japan, which is a process in line with a strong discourse and a state-led strategy for developing the countryside (Dilley et al., 2022), and from other developing countries where counter-urbanisation occurs as a result of urban economic decline (Crankshaw, 2019) or the exclusivity of large cities (Jain & Korzhenvyvh, 2019), causing a shift of population to the countryside.

The emergence of counter-urbanisation in China is a spontaneous inclination among high-and-middle-income urban groups, albeit within the limitations imposed by state policies. The reasons behind this phenomenon bear similarities to counter-urbanisation in Europe and the United States, as they encompass both consumption-side and production-side considerations. The influx of these urban groups into rural regions has a significant impact on rural businesses and employment opportunities, contributing valuable entrepreneurial knowledge and development experiences to rural communities (Bosworth & Finke, 2020). It supports the argument that urban migrants may stimulate economic growth and restructure in rural areas (Bosworth, 2010).

The migration of urban middle-and-high-income groups to rural areas effectively increases local neo-endogenous development (Bosworth & Finke, 2020). Entrepreneurial activities and investment from urban migration help rural communities benefit from urban-rural interdependencies and overcome the shortages of capital, talent, labour forces and technologies which restrain the process of rural development and revitalisation.

In line with the research, the authors argue that counter-urbanization in rural China can facilitate rural revitalisation while preventing the intrusion of capital from urban high-and-middle-income groups, thereby avoiding the displacement of rural villagers or radically changing rural society. This phenomenon, due to the control of the land ownership system in rural China, is distinct from the "rural gentrification" seen in the counter-urbanization processes of the United States and Europe. (Ghose, 2004; Phillips, 1993; Smith, 1979). Consequently, the authors introduce a new term, "Rural Middle-class Formation," as a Chinese type of "rural gentrification" to achieve common prosperity in both urban and rural areas and to distinguish this phenomenon from "rural gentrification" in Western countries. The rural collective land ownership system helps protect villagers' interests and social stability. Influenced by their values and desire for the rural ecological environment and culture, urban migrants value ecology, culture, tradition, and sustainability. Motivated to migrate for these reasons, they aim to protect the countryside. Their investments and operations also inspire and provide good examples for villagers. This significantly benefits rural revitalisation and sustainability in China.

However, this paper only explores one aspect of counter-urbanisation in China. Large capital investment in the countryside

follows another pattern. Unlike small-scale urban resident investment, large capital takes the form of relocating and consolidating villages, transforming rural land collective ownership into state-owned urban land ownership. This can negatively impact villagers' sustainable income and welfare. Future research should explore the pros and cons of this form of counter-urbanisation.

Another risk is that as villagers shorten leases to raise rents, urban migrants may become less willing to invest in the countryside. This could undermine long-term rural revitalisation. Policies should satisfy both villagers' and migrants' interests to achieve win-win outcomes.

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## Author statement

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Miss, Yiran Wang: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft

Ms. Mo Li (Corresponding author): Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Funding acquisition

## Declaration of competing interest

I declare that we have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the research and publication of this paper.

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