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Research Article

The Counter-Urbanization Creative Class and the Sprout of the Creative Countryside: Case Studies on China's Coastal Plain Villages

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ABSTRACT

The counter-urbanization creative class has gradually become an important factor in the revitalization of rural China, driving the steady and healthy development of the rural economy and society. This article explores the motivations and creative practices of the counter-urbanization creative class in the coastal plain villages of China to provide a reference for the development of rural society in China and other countries. Data from this study were obtained through qualitative research with participatory observations and semi-structured interviews. The study found that the rural areas around economically developed regions are increasingly favoured by the counter-urbanization creative class and have quickly become a platform for career development and realizing an ideal life; notably, rural creative industries have sprung up in China's coastal plain villages. To date, the linkage between the counter-urbanization creative class and creative countryside is rarely explored in existing literature; thus, this paper produces a valuable exploration and addition to the area of the sprout of the creative countryside.

Keywords: Counter-urbanization; creative class; motivation; creative village; rural revitalization

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1. Introduction

Creative industry is a product of a post-industrial society (Brouillette, 2008; Ozkurt and Suğur, 2018). At the same time, it also refers to the direction of public policy transfer in the deindustrialized era under the influence of competitive pressure and other factors (Evans and Smith, 2006). Most research on creative industry focuses on the development of creative industries in the urban context (Townsend et al., 2016). In recent years, research on the Chinese creative industry has focused on urban knowledge-based and high-skilled contexts (Justin and Xin, 2012), such as the development of creative industries in museums (Zhang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020), the contemporary creative inheritance of traditional handicrafts (Wang et al., 2020), landscape reconstruction of tangible urban heritage (Wang and Zhao, 2020), the exploration and practice of creative talent training (Shen and Zhou, 2019), the digital creative industry (He and Xiong, 2019), and urban creative space clusters (Justin and Xin, 2012), to name but a few topics.

Existing research rarely discusses the rural cultural industry; however, the topic has nevertheless been gradually attracting attention. In China, the combination of creative industries and rural tourism (Zhang and Li, 2018) has become the main industry support and development path for many villages, such as ethnic minority villages (Zhang, 2014), historical and cultural villages (Sun, 2016), urban-surrounded villages (Ye and Sun, 2017), and landscape villages (including natural landscape villages and artificial landscape villages) (Liu and Zhang, 2020; Song, 2018).

The development practices of China's rural creative industries are mostly top-down (as made evident by the literature of Chinese academic websites [*zhongguo zhiwang*]) and public participation is primarily passive (Sun, 2016). Undeniably, the rural creative industry is an important part of the development of rural tourism; that is, it helps to bring tourists and related vitality to the countryside. Helpful to note for the purpose of this study is that the bottom-up creative class has gradually stepped onto the historical stage as a key player in the development process of China's rural rejuvenation and is today an important fulcrum of new rural construction; indeed, it currently leads the development of rural industries.

Creative studies of rural society have long been set in the context of tourism—notable examples include studies on Japan's 'one village, one product movement;' the ways in which, through creative planning, the countryside has become a place for urban recreation or settlement (Liu, 2009); and plural perspectives of the local history of the ancient town of Zhouzhuang in Suzhou, China's primary water village, and its function as a great place for urbanites to relax and experience the water village life (Xu, 2019). This study mainly examines rural society beyond the tourism context, instead focusing on the motivations driving the counter-urbanization creative class in their work with rural creative industries. To accomplish this goal, we first analyse the concept of counter-urbanization and creative class and their development in China. Second, we focus on the situation of Chinese coastal plain villages in the research area. We point out that with the advent of the creative age, Chinese villages can become an employment option for the counter-urbanization creative class. Third, it takes two sites as examples to analyse the motivations and reasons for the development of the counter-urbanization creative class in the coastal plain. Fourth, this article proposes the 3I model of creative rural development, namely identity, infrastructure, and the Internet. Finally, we note that the counter-urbanization creative class is an important force in the development of the creative village, and the creative village is the development paradigm of sustainable rural development. Notably, little work has thus far been done on the counter-urban creative class.

2. Adapting Counter-urbanization and the Rural Creative Class

2.1. Counter-urbanization

Counter-urbanization, post-industrialization, and globalization are the main driving factors of rural restructuring and transformation in Western countries (Michael, 2018; Hu et al., 2019). 'Counter-urbanization' is a concept first proposed by American geographer Brian J.L. Bailey in 1976 that accompanies de-industrialization and is the inverse of urbanization. The definition of counter-urbanization has always been controversial, and different countries and scholars have different opinions on its connotation and mechanism (Wu, 2020).

Counter-urbanization is also an important part of the urbanization process. Since the middle of the 20th century, many developed countries in the world have transitioned to a stage different from traditional urbanization after their urban population surpassed the rural population: the focus of urbanization development has shifted to the suburbs, and the urban layout has changed from highly concentrated to relatively scattered; the urban spatial structure transitions from a single centre to multiple centres, forming a new regional resource allocation; and the difference between the city and the suburbs is weakened. The two move from separation to unity, forming a new integrated regional entity-metropolitan area (Dear, 2003). This trend marks a shift in the focus of urban development around the world, from a pure population transfer type to a structural transformation type and from centralized urban development to coordinated urban and rural development. This is the advanced development stage of urbanization (Wang, 2014).

China's counter-urbanization development cannot simply be equated to the claims of the Los Angeles School (the model of the edge pulling the centre). The Los Angeles model is a development path that includes local spatial agglomeration in the overall dispersion of the metropolitan area. It advocates a decentralized or diffused urban form and is a typical example of new economy or new urbanization (Dear, 2003).

In Chinese scholarship, 'counter-urbanization' has attracted the attention of professional scholars of economics, sociology, demography, geography, and history and has gradually become a growth centre for multidisciplinary research. To date, discussions mainly focus on the 'presence or absence of counter-urbanization' (Tao and Yang, 2015; Shen, 2019), the 'authenticity of counter-urbanization' (Liu and Li, 2017; Shen, 2018), and 'counter-urbanization similarities and differences' (Shen, 2018; Li, 2017). Notably, scholars of different professional backgrounds agree that the above definition of 'counter-urbanization'—that is, urban-to-rural population migration—holds in the Chinese context' (Shen, 2018; Wang, 2019). Recent research on counter-urbanization in China mainly focuses on migrant workers (Bao, 2018) and members of the middle class seeking a counter-urbanization lifestyle (Zhang, 2018). In China's rural society, the parallel development of urbanization and counter-urbanization is not only feasible but necessary (Wang, 2019) for encouraging the infrastructural developments that improve quality of life and, with it, happiness.

As we have already suggested, counter-urbanization has long been part of the discourse of developed countries and is commonly invoked in references to the highest stage of urban development. A large number of wealthy people have come to small towns with capital and technology and thereby have generated an economic pull in these areas that brings large numbers of rural people together, yielding new modern urban communities and thus urbanization (Meng et al., 2004). Certainly, China's recent reforms and increasing willingness to open up—that is, for China to take on meaningful new ideas and practices and, at once, to share its excellence with the outside world— have been accelerating its urbanization. Despite residents' willingness to stay, social population migration still generally occurs from rural to urban areas, and the outflow rate

of rural populations in counties across the country is showing a deepening trend (Guo et al., 2020). This paper explores China's 'counter-urbanization' in a narrow sense—;that is, it explores the spontaneous movement of the creative class from rural-to-urban-to-rural areas.

2.2. The Rural Creative Class

The creative class has greater flexibility and autonomy than other classes (Florida, 2002). It cannot simply be assumed, of course, that there is no pressure on the creative class and that their work and life are free and easy. Rather, in the case of the creative class, the company gives its employees freer creative space, and the corporate culture is more tolerant.

The flow of the creative class is based on the needs of urbanization. The cultural and creative industries accompanying urbanization have also experienced a process of germination, growth, and rise. As a new economic format, the cultural and creative industry reflects the dominant direction of the urbanization strategy on the one hand while on the other hand, it also changes the social industrial structure and its spatial layout, affecting the path to urbanization and even becoming a new source of power for urbanization. It has important significance that cannot be ignored for the deep promotion of urbanization. China's counter-urbanization development path has several issues. First, whether there is counter-urbanization in China is still controversial. However, in the region studied in this article with the highest degree of economic development, urbanization and counter-urbanization have developed in parallel (Bao and Wang, 2017). Second, the development of counter-urbanization in the region studied is the spontaneous agglomeration of the creative class.

The flow of the creative class is based on amenity migration. Rural communities in the post-industrial world are undergoing a major transformation, sometimes referred to as rural structural adjustment, because traditional land use, economic activities, and social arrangements are transitioning to those related to the 'post-productivity' or'multifunctional' pattern field. Amenity migration is the movement of people attracted by natural and/or cultural convenience facilities (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011), yet the flow of China's counter-urbanization creative class, in the current stage of Chinese social development, has not been pointed out by any research as being due to amenity immigration.

The flow of the creative class is based on the human environment and landscape. The city's human environment and scenes attract the flow and gathering of a creative class. Therefore, the future competitiveness of big cities is reflected in their ability to attract the creative class. Meanwhile, the creative class prefers inclusive, diverse, and open urban community cultures (Wu, 2019).

With the development of creative industries, the creative class has become an emerging professional group. In sociology, the term 'class' comes from the theory of social stratification; however, research on the creative class in China is more oriented toward the field of human resource management, calling it 'creative talent' and emphasizing its economic significance (Zhang, 2017). China's creative class is still in a transition period and is undergoing a transformation in its primary subjectivity from a cultural subject to a creative subject (Zhang and Xi, 2010). Important to note is that uniqueness and creativity can be constrained by factors such as cultural level (i.e. educational background), city openness (i.e. restrictions on immigrant settlements), and policy tolerance (i.e. policies that regulate levels of tolerance, such as, for example, towards same-sex partnerships). The level of creativity varies, creative talents are severely divided, and ideologies are circulating that 'cultural people have no creativity' and 'creative people have no culture.' In 2014, the Chinese government implemented an innovation-driven development strategy that proposed a new goal of 'mass entre-

preneurship, innovation by all people;' attached importance to the flow of talents for innovation and entrepreneurship; and encouraged university students, corporate employees, and employees of public institutions to start their own businesses and smooth investment channels for small enterprises and micro-enterprises. Under the protection of the system, these actors will become the main representatives of China's creative class in the future (Zhang, 2017).

For the purpose of this study, it is crucial to remember that China's creative class plays an important role in rural development—the roles of this class in tourism, rural revitalization, and beautiful rural construction are increasingly affirmed across the board; the creative class is an important discoverer, presenter, communicator, designer, and rebuilder of rural tourist destinations. Along these lines, it is a force that cannot be ignored in rural tourism development and rural revitalization; certainly, the creative class is a formative influence on future rural development trends (Li and Luo, 2019). At the same time, the management and operation of a village depends on the creative class, with the construction of small towns, whether cultural and creative or not, with Chinese characteristics in full swing; creativity is required to make such development sustainable. More specifically, the rural creative class plays an important role in town planning, the creation of cultural activities in towns, the management of cultural industries, inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, the consumption of fashion culture, and the facilitation of foreign cultural exchanges (Yang, 2018). At the core of improving the creative level of such characteristic towns is the collection of a team with culturally rooted creative talents.

On the whole, creative talents prefer residences that are close to city centres and workplaces and that have convenient transportation facilities, comprehensive basic education facilities, high-quality medical facilities, good cultural facilities, and good ecological conditions (Wang et al., 2019). Obviously, rural areas in China do not have sufficient conditions for creative talents to move in and gather. However, with these concepts in mind, we now turn to the motivations of the counter-urbanization creative class in China's rural coastal plain villages, which are mainly located in the northern region of Jiangsu Province. More specifically, we focus on the prefecture-level cities of Lianyungang and Suqian, where the innate endowment to develop tourism is very scarce.

3. The Rural Field: What Characterizes a Good Habitus for the Counter-urbanization Creative Class?

3.1 Characteristics of China's Coastal Plain Villages

The study of rural society involves many disciplines, and it is thus not surprising that the classification of villages is inconsistent. More specifically, based on the proportion of the three industrial structures, China's rural areas are divided into four types of rural development: agricultural-led development, industrial-led development, business travel services development, and balanced development (Zhang and Zhang, 2020). According to the Tourism Resource Endowment, villages can be divided into historical and cultural villages, ethnic minority villages, folk-customs villages, landscape villages, and mixed resource villages (Sun, 2016). Historically, most rural villages in northern Jiangsu have been agricultural-led settlements, which, in the context of China's large-scale rural development, are the least attractive.

Meanwhile, China's other rural areas have market economy development advantages that are not available in northern Jiangsu's rural areas; however, they also have many development disadvantages. Traditional local customs have played an important role in the long-term development of Chinese rural society; in particular, local identity, reciprocity, and ritual characteristics play important roles in maintaining rural social stability, consolidating rural rules and covenants, and

regulating villager behaviour. However, the transformation of rural society has resulted in the transformation of local conditions. Monetization, fame and fortune, and marginalization, to name but a few factors, have given rise to corruption, distorted social values, and weak interpersonal communication (Zhang, 2019). With the advancement of urbanization, a large number of rural young adults have migrated to the city, which has led to empty nesting and vacant houses. Due to these trends, rural governance is now mainly driven by sustainable external forces and lacks self-generated power; put differently, today, autonomy is dead in the countryside (Lu and Chen, 2019). In a sense, the withering of the countryside and rural-to-urban population migration are the characteristics of global rural development.

In addition to the shortcomings of inadequate endowment for development and the common dilemma of rural development in the northern plain villages of Jiangsu, there are many advantages in the region that attract the creative class. For example, Jiangsu is the second-most economically developed province in China and is the province in which all Chinese college students want to settle after graduation. Even the relatively poor areas of northern Jiangsu still attract a large number of graduates from other provinces because youth can gain employment by passing civil servant examinations and public institution recruitment examinations or through corporate recruitment.

Along these lines, the quality of education in Jiangsu is the best in the country, and its college entrance examination is an autonomous proposition (that is, it is organized by the province rather than the country). Because of the high degree of difficulty, the Jiangsu college entrance examination is often called a 'hellish' exam by people. Along these lines, students in the northern Jiangsu plain area are particularly good at learning and tend to cultivate a large number of talents. However, because there are limits on the number of college students in each province, many high-quality students in Jiangsu Province are unable to complete undergraduate courses and can only attend vocational colleges. As a result, for many years, the talents cultivated in northern Jiangsu have remained in big cities, and the region has thus experienced a brain drain.

However, with Jiangsu Province now enjoying increasing development, the northern part of Jiangsu attracts not only an influx of talents from other provinces but also the return of local talent. Relatively speaking, northern Jiangsu is likely to attract more talent as its economy continues to develop.

Similarly, the continuous improvement of the Quality of Life and Happiness Index is also attracting an influx of talents to Jiangsu. The creative class studied in this article is the counter-urbanization group, who have been well-educated and have worked and lived in big cities. After rationally analysing the life development opportunities in the rural environment of northern Jiangsu plain villages, they decided to return to their hometowns and use their wisdom to create economic value, drive local employment, and increase local income.

3.2. The Counter-urbanization Creative Class Empowers the Countryside

With the advent of the creative economy era, China's creative class has begun to complement the development of rural tourism—certainly, rural tourism requires a creative class. During this period, creative classes and creative institutions of different styles and cultural backgrounds settled in rural areas where they contributed technology and fashion; created a multicultural atmosphere; combined historical and cultural blocks and literary and artistic creative activities with experience-based tourism; encouraged inheritors of intangible cultural heritage to settle in, plan, and organize festivals and events; and made tourism more attractive from the perspective of 'creative +' (Lu, 2019).

Accordingly, the creative class has made important contributions to the development of rural tourism, especially in minority areas of China. The growth conditions and environment of the creative class played an important role in the process of mining ethnic cultural resources and grasping market dynamics; in the interactive relationship between the creative class and national tourist destinations, a sense of identity and belonging was established, and the ethnic village became a platform with which the creative class achieved self-worth (Zheng et al., 2019). Today, the counter-urbanization creative class is increasingly gaining attention in inflow regions, which are characterized by improved infrastructure, optimized living environment, policy stability, profitable policy support, diverse spaces, active exchanges, development platforms, and the gathering of creative talents (Lou, 2018).

4. Materials and Methods

The sites studied in this article are located in the Yangtze River Economic Belt, which has the highest degree of economic development in China. The central cities of the Yangtze River Economic Belt have seen the phenomenon of‘counter-urbanization,’ in which the population spreads from the central cities to the periphery (Zhang and Mei, 2020). However, the rapid development of the coastal plain also benefited from the impact of counter-urbanization. This study selected two typical cases of the counter-urbanization creative class driving rural development in the northern Jiangsu plain. The two locations have become the regions with the highest concentration of anti-urbanization talents, a significant development of creative industries, and the largest number of incubated small and micro-enterprises. Additionally, both cases are set in sites with the lowest potential for development out of China’s coastal plain villages. In the early 21st century, both were agriculturally dominant villages. This section outlines the cases and the survey-based data collection methods.

4.1. The Two Sites

Site 1: Yandong, the ‘Underwear Town’

Yandong Village is located in Dongwangji Town, Guanyun County, Lianyungang, Jiangsu (Figure 1). The township has a permanent population of approximately 60,000; is 40 kilometres from the city centre; and is 270 kilometres from Shanghai, Nanjing, Suzhou, and other developed cities. Ten years ago, the county seat of this village was still very poor and its economy had a low rank compared to others in Jiangsu Province. Today, it has grown and become China’s ‘underwear production centre’, manufacturing more than 70% of China’s erotic underwear and contracting 80% of China’s graduation uniforms.

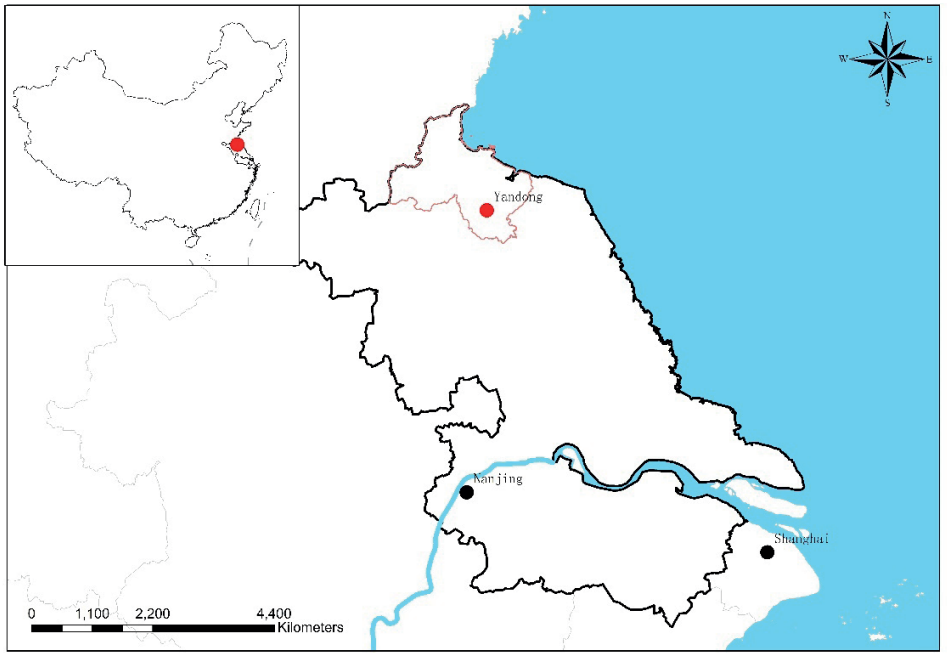


Figure 1. Yandong in Lianyungang, Jiangsu

With the advent of the creative economy era, this village is building a 'Chinese version of Victoria's Secret' through branding. Around 2006, when online shopping in China had just started, the village's youth seized business opportunities and led villagers to engage in underwear production and sales. Gradually, larger regions and villages became involved in the production and processing of underwear. According to a big data app focused on enterprises (Qichacha), as many as 2,164 companies are engaged in apparel production and sales in Guanyun. Among them, there are more than 600 erotic lingerie manufacturers and sales outlets of a certain scale and more than 20 'big' clothing factories with a registered capital above 10 million yuan—and these figures are continuing to grow. Putting aside the 'big' clothing factories, it is helpful to note that there were 59,796 local individual industrial and commercial households in Guanyun with a registration rate of 77.74% as of the end of 2019, ranking first in all of Lianyungang City. Moreover, the distribution of underwear manufacturers has expanded beyond its original location in Dongwangji Town to the adjacent economic development zone of Yishan Town, which together form the 'Chinese underwear kingdom'—indeed, family workshops are even hidden in the countryside of these two towns. According to the planning of the local county government, Dongwangji Town, where Yandong Village is located, will be built into an 'underwear creative town' in China. The project will include the creation of a business incubation centre, and the government will provide loans and financing services for the underwear industry chain to attract more counter-urbanization creatives to start their businesses in Guanyun.

Site 2: Gengche, 'Venture Dreamworks'

Gengche Town is located in the northwest of Suqian City, Jiangsu Province (Figure 2), approximately 10 kilometres from the city centre, and approximately 250 kilometres from Nanjing, the

capital of Jiangsu. Due to zoning adjustments, as of the end of 2018, Gengche Town had jurisdiction over 2 residential communities and 7 administrative villages with a population of more than 20,000 people. Notably, Gengche Town used to be a flood-stricken area of the Yellow River. Grain was often not harvested, and many villagers were forced to go out to 'pick up trash' to support their families, while others became 'beggars.' Perhaps 'poverty inspires change:' since the 1980s, Gengche Town has developed a waste plastics processing industry,with 'four rounds of rotation' among townships, villages, households, and joint households, and has gradually formed the largest waste plastics processing base in East China. At its peak, 70% of the town's population was engaged in this industry, with an annual transaction volume of more than 1.5 million tons and a transaction value of more than 3 billion yuan. However, the costs of pollution controls such as water, gas, and soil in the Gengche area surpassed 1 billion yuan during this period—the environment was being scarified for development, sieged by garbage. In response, at the end of 2015, Suqian City started a 'plastic waste annihilation war' in Gengche Town. In January 2016, the municipal government issued a decision to completely shut down the waste plastic processing enterprises in Gengche Town.

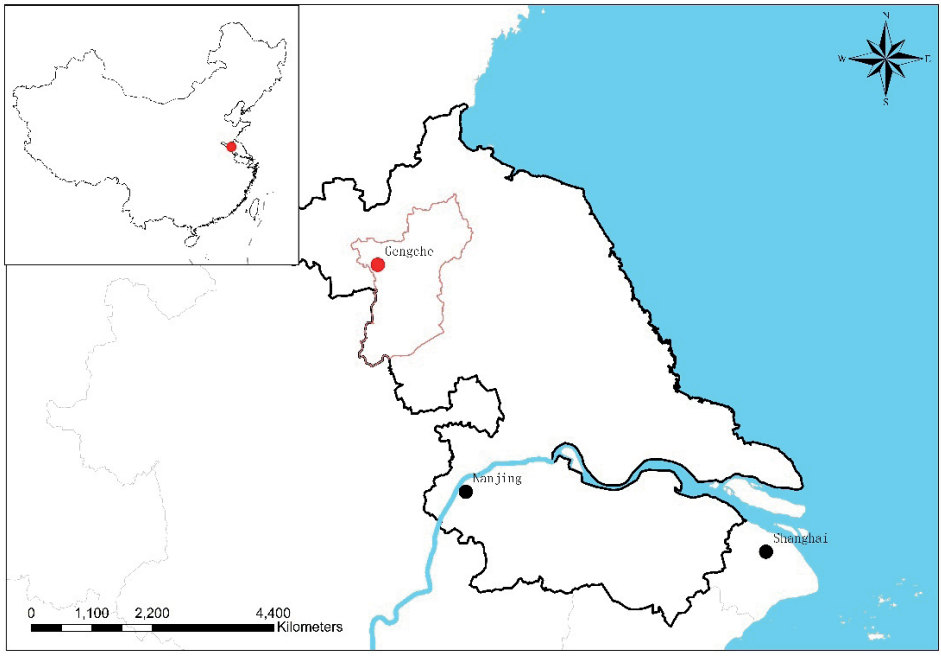


Figure 2. Gengche in Suqian, Jiangsu

The national development concept of 'green water, green mountains are golden mountains and silver mountains,' which signifies that the people cannot seek temporary development at the expense of the environment but must instead adhere to green, low-carbon, and low-pollutant development ideals for the benefit of inheriting generations, affected the Gengche people, who were seeking transformation; ultimately, it set off a craze for entrepreneurship. After three years of development, Gengche Town gradually formed four major industrial clusters: green horticulture,

e-commerce entrepreneurship, logistics and express delivery, and smoothing plastic products. Today, Gengche Town has more than 2,700 online stores, 22,000 people engaged in e-commerce and related work, and a 300,000-square-meter greenhouse that serves as an ecological and agricultural demonstration park, which has cultivated and sold nearly 100 million succulent plants. As a result, Gengche Town has been termed 'China's E-commerce Town' and the 'Provincial Ecological Township'.

4.2. Data Acquisition

The hidden standard for a contextual investigation approach is that it makes conceivable the procedure of 'hypothesis working' through subjective examination (Yin, 2009). A contextual investigation approach provides the opportunity to use blended strategies (Stake, 1994): researchers can observe a phenomenon from different points of view; accordingly, the result of blended strategies can be synergistic, as captured by Mintzberg's (1979) claim that 'while precise information makes the establishment for our speculations, it is the emotional information that empower us to do the structure.' Mintzberg (1979) further proposed that the making of theoretical models requires rich portrayals: 'we reveal a wide range of connections in our hard information; however, it is only by using delicate information that we can clarify them.' Accordingly, contextual analyses are used to pass on a multidimensional delineation of the unique circumstances, members, and truth of the occasion or circumstance (Stake, 1994).

This survey used an account system to ground the assortment and investigation of data. The abstract data collected through the subjective research approach was valuable for understanding the mental inspiration of the counter-urbanization creative class. The method of grouping to verify a hypothesis from contextual investigation-based research is, of course, a common procedure and thus this study's method has experimental legitimacy and appropriateness as story information will likely be predictable with member perception; moreover, it is connected to observational support (Yin, 2009).

The field survey was divided into two stages. The first involved a formal visit to the two villages in the summer of 2018 as well as an oral history survey. The second stage, which took place at the end of 2019, involved structured and semi-structured interviews with informants through WeChat. The majority of respondents were born after 1980 (see interviewee information in Table 1). In total, 15 informants (8 in Yandong and 7 in Gengche) were interviewed in-person using a semi structured, in-depth approach. The interviewees included e-commerce operators, senior photographers, fashion designers, horticultural operators, e-commerce practitioners, planners, and business partners who use creative thinking to seek market opportunities. Notable participants included designers, managers responsible for integrating creativity, and those with aesthetic outlooks and capabilities favoured by the Chinese advertising industry. As Hawkins (2001) puts it, such individuals make money with ideas. Important sources of information included official websites, newsletters, and big data apps.

Table 1: Interviewee information

Informant	Age	Location	Education	Gender	Occupation
Interviewee 1	34	Yandong	undergraduate	female	e-commerce entrepreneur
Interviewee 2	32	Yandong	HVE	female	Fashion designer
Interviewee 3	35	Yandong	HVE	male	e-commerce entrepreneur
Interviewee 4	40	Yandong	undergraduate	male	visual designer
Interviewee 5	37	Yandong	undergraduate	male	designer
Interviewee 6	35	Yandong	undergraduate	male	e-commerce entrepreneur

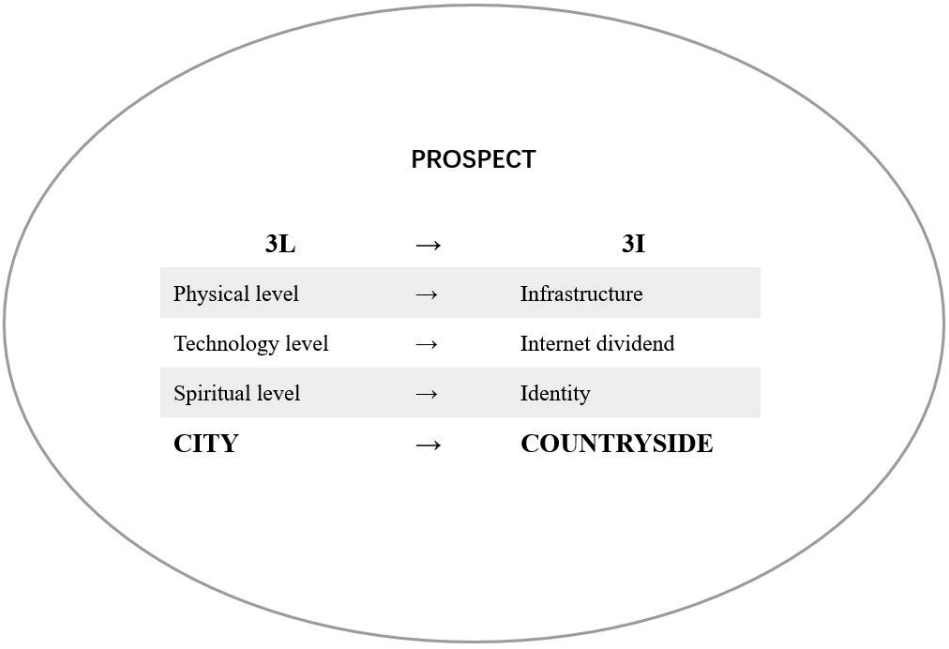
Interviewee 7	34	Yandong	undergraduate	male	e-commerce entrepreneur
Interviewee 8	33	Yandong	HVE	female	e-commerce entrepreneur
Interviewee 9	35	Gengche	undergraduate	male	horticultural entrepreneur
Interviewee 10	37	Gengche	postgraduate	female	government servant
Interviewee 11	36	Gengche	HVE	male	e-commerce entrepreneur
Interviewee 12	42	Gengche	undergraduate	female	translator; florist
Interviewee 13	34	Gengche	undergraduate	female	advertising
Interviewee 14	36	Gengche	undergraduate	male	e-commerce practitioner
Interviewee 15	30	Gengche	HVE	male	entrepreneur

* HVE=higher vocational education

5. Comprehensive Analysis

The reason the rural areas in northern Jiangsu can attract the anti-urban creative class can be summarized as the '3I Theory' (see Table 2), that is, infrastructure, the Internet, and identity. While the physical and technical levels of the villages are almost the same as those seen in cities, their spiritual level indicates that the countryside is a more comfortable home.

Table 2: 3I Theory Model



5.1. Reconstruction of Local Identity

In the context of modernization, globalization, and informatization, the core crisis of the various crises facing China is the identity crisis (Li, 2000). More specifically, here, 'identity crisis' refers to a crisis of cultural identity, meaning the cohesion and continuation of a community's spiritual bond. This type of crisis is a huge challenge for individuals who were born in the impoverished north Jiangsu plain region 20 years ago; they largely believe that they can only escape

poverty by leaving their hometown. 'Our village is very poor. When I was young, I followed my parents in the fields to do farm work, and I could see the vast farmland. At that time, I wanted to go out and look at the outside world. I heard people say that going to a big city would help you earn more money than you could from farm work, so I was determined to go to the city to make money. When I study, I work very hard. The carp leaps into the dragon gate to success, and rural children can only go out if they read books' (Interviewee 6).

In the past, poverty was a common memory of every rural child in the northern Jiangsu plain villages. Although cities in China had been affected by globalization, most rural areas in the north Jiangsu plain remained in the traditional stage of agricultural development—children and parents who depended on the land rarely left the village; 'When I went to college, I knew that the countryside and the city were very different. The first time I went to eat hot pot, the first time I went to eat Western food, the first time I went to the zoo...I experienced the richness of urban life' (Interviewee 14). Generally, education seems to be the only way for rural children to reverse their destiny; 'Junior high school teachers often warn children in the countryside that there are people outside the mountain; no pain, no gain; and that the last laugh is the real laugh—these words are rooted in our hearts and fighting to get into the city is like the only dream of rural children. To prepare for the middle school entrance examination—a way to enter the best high school in the county which provides the greatest opportunity to attend college and receive the best quality education—many students get up from the school dormitory to go to the classroom to study throughout junior school. The various infrastructures are not good. In the winter, there are no heating facilities, and you can only learn while shaking your body to warm up' (Interviewee 7). When every household in the local area is equally poor, these memories of bitterness are not so bitter; 'I spent my childhood on the vast plains of cropland. It was pleasant, natural, and smelled of grass. This is also the deepest memory of my hometown' (Interviewee 13).

Education changes the direction an individual may take in life, and values also open up with the broadening of horizons. Various temptations in the city can also cause the collapse of rural college students' values and self-identity; 'When I entered university, computers began to spread, and I was obsessed with all kinds of new things on the Internet. Many of my classmates began to worship money. Regardless of their families' conditions, they would spend their parents' money to experience the brilliance of urban life' (Interviewee 12).

In 2006, the post-80s generation sparked a large societal discussion about whether they were the generation that broke down or whether they were the sunshine generation. It has been said that education has changed the direction of rural students' lives, has changed the imprint rural life makes on youth, and has established a new set of identification concepts related to the new environment; 'Most of us are indoctrinated by parents and educators, have the prospect of having everything, and work hard in the direction they expect. But at the same time, we are living in an era of highly developed information. The impact brought about by network culture, as well as the concept of Western culture's pursuit of freedom and emancipation of thought, entered our lives silently as our generation grew up and affected our ideals and pursuits and the coordinates of our lives. Therefore, while Westerners are calling for a return to tradition and for a return to morality, our generation is desperately advocating freedom and liberation' (Interviewee 1). Certainly, the advantages and disadvantages of urbanization and globalization have not troubled only them but also urban students.

Staying in the city becomes an ideal target for rural college students. Today, rural development remains relatively slow, with comparatively few opportunities—along these lines, rural environments are not always ideal places for college students to find employment; 'In any era, big

cities always represent a newer culture, better services, richer opportunities, and fuller dreams. Such opportunities and dreams make young people active in big cities. They have something to look forward to and deserve a better future' (Interviewee 9); 'Big cities have more space for imagination and, in the future, metropolises will become more and more intelligent, providing residents with more unimaginable conveniences. Living in big cities is the future of most people. To put it simply, cities are places where people come together to gather resources to do big things. The more resources, the bigger the platform, the more things you can do and the more fun it is, and this platform will become more and more versatile, smarter and more human with its development' (Interviewee 4).

'However, not everyone lives in a big city, not everyone lives in a new era, and not everyone likes the hustle and bustle of work. I have never been a hard-working person. Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing have never been attractive to me. The prosperity and opportunities of big cities are not what I want. I just want to live quietly in my hometown after my doctorate. Work pressure is not great, the pace of life is not fast, a few stops after work is my parents' house…I do not want to be alone in a big city. If my work pressure is heavy and I feel sad, I can only hold my pillow and cry. Working in my hometown gives me the opportunity to be a little capricious and occasionally unreasonable' (Interviewee 10).

Today, there are equal development opportunities in rural areas of the northern Jiangsu plain and in cities. However, as one respondent notes, 'There is a poisonous chicken soup in the heart: the ideal is to leave home. In order to pursue your ideal, you must leave home. And you have probably heard this sentence: big cities cannot tolerate the body, and the hometown cannot carry the soul. Is there really a choice between ideal and hometown? I want to say that there are many opportunities in my hometown. No need to drift' (Interviewee 2).

Homesickness, the emotional expression of the sense of belonging and identity, is considered an important link in the rural revitalization strategy (Yang and Zhang, 2019). Our study revealed that the hometown complex took root in the minds of the people of northern Jiangsu. When residents who had left to live and work in big cities returned home to see their parents, they consistently found that their hometowns were undergoing drastic changes. 'There is also a green lotus in the water stop. It seems that the hometown that has been well-preserved for years has hidden business opportunities that can stir up the storm' (Interviewee 2). The endogenous value of nostalgia is the recognition of human nature, the remodelling of traditional values, and the measurement of the main social value. Some scholars propose that nostalgia may be used to guide values to achieve the correct order; activate related endogenous economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological values; promote the overall revitalization of a village; and consolidate the foundation of the national governance system (Yang and Zhang, 2019).

5.2. Improvement of Infrastructure

'Waste is scraped by wind and sewage is evaporated'; 'A lot of dirt on sunny days, mud on shoes on rainy days.' Once, these quotes truly portrayed many rural environments. This has also become a limiting factor for the development of rural areas. In the rural areas of western Ireland, for example, quality of life, natural environment, and regional creative legacy have become critical factors for attracting people (White, 2010); however, these elements are not widely available in northern Jiangsu or, indeed, in most of China. Improving the rural living environment is an inevitable requirement for rural revitalization policy. Along these lines, the 2018 Central Document No. 1 called for the 'comprehensive implementation of the improvement of rural human

settlements with a focus on rural garbage and sewage treatment, toilet revolution, and improvement of village appearance'. It is important to note that the housing conditions of rural residents in northern Jiangsu are generally not high. Infrastructure and other public facilities such as water supply and drainage, roads, sewage treatment, and garbage collection and transportation lag behind those of developed cities (Chu, 2020).

Poor living conditions are also a major reason why former residents moved to cities and were reluctant to return home. 'Dazhong Village is the most polluted area in Gengche Town. Rural cadres have a plastic smell when they go to meetings. Even passing cars are reluctant to open windows—people cannot stand the Gengche taste. Five years ago, Gengche banned the closure of nearly 5,000 waste plastic processing enterprises' processing points and freight yards; cleared and transported more than 500,000 tons of waste; and dredged rivers, reclaimed land, planted seedlings, and restored ecology. The environmental pollution problems that have plagued the masses for more than 20 years have been gradually resolved. The original garbage dump was transformed into a fishpond, park, and fitness square' (Interviewee 11). 'When it was raining, the road was muddy and not in decent condition. The village lacked a unified plan, and the village looked shabby. In recent years, the villagers have become richer and richer. Everyone lives in small villas. Many people also built villas as family workshops' (Interviewee 3).

The improvement of transportation facilities has enabled transportation from the farthest city in Jiangsu plain to developed cities such as Shanghai and Nanjing in approximately 2 hours, connecting the life of the plain villages to metropolises and further enhancing the happiness of the counter-urbanization creative class; 'Every time I go to school in Nanjing, I have trouble with transportation. The bus takes four to five hours to Nanjing and the train takes seven hours. Because the bumps on the bus will make me vomit, I can only take the train, but there are a lot of people on the train and it is not convenient to move. I always feel that there are so many Chinese people. I cannot elegantly and comfortably go home or to school. During the Spring Festival, it is especially difficult to get onto the train. Sometimes people have to stand and wait for four to five hours. When high-speed trains are put in place, it will take less than two hours to go to Nanjing. This will make it more and more convenient to go shopping on weekends in big cities' (Interviewee 5); 'I came from a foreign province and was engaged in the visual design of local underwear products. I came to Guanyun nine years ago and was attracted by the honest folk customs here. At that time, it was still relatively undeveloped and I could only get around by car. Over the years, the development has changed rapidly. After the high-speed train is installed, I will go to Qingdao to eat seafood, drink beer, and see the city light show when I am not busy' (Interviewee 4).

Rural landscapes are important mediums for comprehensive reflection about natural and human resources and are deeply linked to rural styles, and rural development is increasingly valuing architectural style, green streets, and the excavation of fine cultural traditions. 'While rural urbanization does not occur on as large a scale as in a city, everything here is no worse than in a big city; the environment is getting better and better and the village is clean, tidy, and orderly' (Interviewee 8).

5.3. Internet Dividend

'The Internet has become a necessity in our lives and our infrastructure. Internet thinking has become the most fundamental form of business thinking, and the starting point of all business behaviour. There will be no more Internet companies in the future because all companies will become Internet companies. Every household in our village is doing e-commerce or engaging in the e-commerce industry chain' (Interviewee 1). Yandong can be said to be the earliest beneficia-

ry of China's Internet e-commerce dividend.

As early as 1962, there was some sense that technology would bring people and economies closer together in the form of a 'global village' (McLuhan, 1962); 'The biggest problems in rural areas are information occlusion, scattered resources, and poor communication. The biggest feature of the Internet is the connection, which can easily break through various information gaps using information technology, integrate various types of decentralized resources, and achieve unhindered communication between the countryside and the outside world. Just like the three major items of the color TV, the refrigerator, and the washing machine of the historical well-off peasant family, today there are three major pieces of the main application of the rural Internet: short video, mobile games, and online shopping. Here, we are also transforming from a waste plastic processing plant into an e-commerce entrepreneurial town via the Internet' (Interviewee 15).

With the rise of short video platforms, the 'information gap' between urban and rural areas has been further bridged, and new opportunities for rural e-commerce entrepreneurship are being ushered in; 'Our products are sold through some Internet platforms, especially short video platforms such as Tiktok and Kuaishou. Using creative thinking, information is converted into real economic income through live broadcasting or making product-related short videos and publishing on the platform' (Interviewee 9); 'In rural fields, under warm quilts, and even in cave dwellings on the Loess Plateau, countless people are recording their lives or watching others recording their lives through short videos. From my observations, on the rural market alone, Tiktok and Kuaishou have become welcome parts of new lifestyles for many farmers. Increasingly, I feel that there is not much difference between rural and urban' (Interviewee 14); 'Suning and even JD, Alibaba, and other mainstream e-commerce platforms are vigorously deploying rural e-commerce. Village consumers can enjoy the changes that technology has brought to life on an equal and synchronized basis with urban consumers. They can now equally and simultaneously purchase goods from all over the country and even from all over the world; moreover, they can enjoy a comprehensive service system on an equal and synchronized basis with urban consumers' (Interviewee 10).

In short, with the development of science and technology, the 'Internet +' has entered the vast Chinese countryside and gradually penetrated all aspects of rural agricultural production and life. Featured industries such as rural e-commerce, agricultural product processing, rural tourism, leisure agriculture, and rural sports health have steadily emerged. These changes suggest that a new information and industrial revolution is sweeping through the Chinese countryside. Notably, this information flow drives technological, capital, and talent flows into rural areas and encourages the construction of rural Internet towns characterized by elements that emerge in response to the demands of this new era.

6. Conclusion

This article provides an in-depth study and reveals a feasible paradigm for the sustainable development of rural society in the process of urbanization. Urbanization is the general trend of rapid economic, social, and spatial transformation in China. However, relying on the coastal plain of the Yangtze River Delta, the most economically developed region of China, also means the development of counter-urbanization. This study reviews the development of counter-urbanization in China, and its similarities and differences in relation to other countries around the world suggests the concept of Chinese localization of the creative countryside, that is, a group comprising the anti-urbanized creative class, spontaneously from the city to the countryside, using creative thinking for career development. The germination of the creative countryside can be traced

back to the beginning of the 21st century; it was born alongside the widespread use of the Internet in China. The logic for the emergence of creative villages is not complicated and can be summarized as the 3I model (identification, infrastructure, and the Internet). It is reproducible and is not affected by the rural natural environment, cultural environment, lifestyle, landscape, or other factors. It can even become a path for rural poverty alleviation, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. This study selected villages in agricultural, restricted-development areas with the scarcest resource endowments for its analysis model, and this development paradigm is reflected in many villages in the Yangtze River Delta.

Admittedly, the counter-urbanization creative class is merely a weak fish upstream in the rapid urbanization process. The creative class has a clear preference for urban 'diversity.' Creative talents tend to choose open, diverse, and tolerant cities. A diverse city can tolerate different thinking, accept new ideas, absorb different cultures, and tolerate different lifestyles; such a place has a clear competitive advantage for attracting talent or human capital. Today, the creative class in China frequently migrates from traditional communities, working class centres, and even many sunny areas to 'creative centre' cities to pursue rich local high-tech foundations, a highly open urban atmosphere, and the many employment opportunities that highlight creative class identities (Sheng and Ma, 2008).

However, such a small fish with weak strength can become an important force for the development of a rural society facing empty nesting and general decline. In contrast to Florida's (2002) claims that the creative class is flexible and autonomous, China's counter-urbanized creative class presents local characteristics with Chinese thinking and Chinese characteristics. Most of them are locals who seek education with the intention of returning to their hometown for professional development and do not consider the economic status, living environment, ecological environment, cultural and educational environment, technological environment, or other conditions of that hometown; their return is, in fact, voluntary and spontaneous. According to the current development of Chinese rural society, comparatively, rural areas are often perceived as having few elements that are attractive to creative talents. This article focused on what kind of motivations drive the counter-urbanization creative class to work in and cultivate rural creative industries and return home from the city. The two sites studied in this article are located in economically developed province. We found that the improvement of local economic conditions, the improvement of infrastructure, the effective use of opportunities in the Internet creative era, and the reconstruction of local identity enable rural areas to attract the counter-urbanization creative class to serve local industrial development. This paper alone cannot explain China's overall rural development and the general trend of creative class mobility; nevertheless, this research illuminates the localization of the rural creative economy in China and the contribution of the creative industry's rural shift and provides a model for other global rural development. Meanwhile, it will take time to verify whether the budding creative countryside will be integrated into the development of urbanization and become the normal state of urbanization.

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