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## The Penetration of Urban Building Design Characteristics to Traditional Rural Residences in China: A Systematic Literature Review

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** At present, there are many Chinese rural houses imitating and copying the urban residential environment. The rural areas have lost their own cultural advantages and blindly worship the urban building, which is not normal. Instead, the rural areas should primarily have their own characteristics that are distinguished from the urban areas. In this context, the aim of the study is to review the development path of Chinese rural housing for conducting a literature review, in the hope of exploring the development direction suitable for Chinese rural residences.

**Methodology:** In this study, a qualitative research approach is taken by combing existing literature and book material, mainly from published journals, figures and books representing traditional Chinese housing, architecture and habitat, and official state government websites. The history, current situation, and development trends of rural housing in China are clarified. At the same time, the evolution of urban residential architecture is studied in comparison, emphasising the changes brought about by the penetration of urban building into rural residences.

**Findings:** While praise and admiration for traditional Chinese dwellings, such as rural dwellings, are reflected in their functionality, skill and humanistic values, most scholars of modern Chinese rural dwellings criticise the rapid economic development of China for bringing about urbanisation and the fact that the countryside has not developed but has instead become incestuous and lost its own character. In a context of mutually beneficial construction of the city and the countryside, more elements of design, art and technology are integrated into rural housing to give hope and theoretical guidance.

**Conclusion and Recommendation:** The new rural residences have taken urban buildings as their standard and have followed suit, losing their own characteristics. Behind this state of affairs are implicitly political, economic, cultural, technological and educational factors, which need to be taken into account and accumulated in practice for the purpose of building an excellent rural area in China and forming a harmonious development between urban and rural areas.

**Keywords:** Rural Residences, Urban Building, Penetration, China

## 1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese society has been a subsistence agriculture-led society. With the development of the economy, China's rapid economic growth in the last fifty years has led to a change in the structure of people's needs, with a growing proportion of secondary industries engaged in industry and construction and tertiary industries involved in services, and the change in industrial structure has accelerated the process of urbanisation. At the same time, urban expansion drives the country's GDP growth (Seto et al. 2011), and China has been undergoing rapid urbanisation since the 1990s, with cities exploding in size and populations. The urban population in the region reached 914 million, accounting for 64.7% of the total population, far exceeding the rural population of 498 million. The growing number of rural dwellers flock to cities in search of more employment opportunities based on secondary and tertiary industries. Apart from that, due to the traditional Chinese practice of marrying in a new house, more young people taking up employment in cities, and the availability of advanced education and healthcare in cities, there is a sharp increase in demand for housing in towns, while vacant homes in rural areas.

In terms of rural governance in China, new and vacant houses are re-planned and redesigned under the auspices of the local government authorities. This planning and design always show the penetration of the urban form into the countryside. While integrating the available land, the unfavourable aspects of the rural village environment that once presented themselves, especially dirt, mess, and poor lighting, are solved. Besides, the problems of poor ventilation and light in rural houses are also solved. Furthermore, new technologies such as solar energy and smart homes have enhanced rural dwellings to keep up with the times, whereas new construction techniques such as modular dwellings made of reinforced concrete materials have considerably shortened the construction period, facilitated the construction, and decreased pollution. In general, these new objects of urbanisation are being applied and promoted in rural dwellings.

The infiltration of the city into the countryside has superficially solved the problems in the rural residential environment. Still, the country has instead become an inferior version of the city, with rural architecture and residential settings losing their own characteristics and the culture of the countryside being slowly forgotten. Considering that, this paper explores the changing relationship between rural and urban housing and aims to find a rational path for rural housing in the light of the infiltration of urban building forms into rural housing.

## 2. Research on the development of rural residences in China

### 2.1 Definition of rural areas

In contemporary rural areas, part of the definition relies on administrative boundaries, such as communities, ZIP codes, and censuses (Bennett et al., 2019). The definition of rural area in the United States is adopted by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) according to the urban boundary. To be specific, the urban area is first defined, and the rural area is not included in the urban area. However, in China, according to the method of "China Statistical Yearbook" published by the National Bureau of Statistics, China's contemporary rural areas are divided

into administrative regions, which are country-province-city-county-town (township)-village (Le Junjie, 2006). It belongs to the scope of rural statistics. Other than that, in order to facilitate the management, villages are classified into administrative villages and natural villages, where the former is composed of two or more natural villages. The administrative unit is the resident population of the village in the township. Similar to countries such as the United States, contemporary China also takes the population as the standard for dividing cities and villages. Another part of the definition of rural areas is defined by industry. Zhang Xiaolin, (1998) argued that rural areas refer to territories where agricultural production is the mainstay, where people engaged in agricultural production are farmers, and where working people mainly carrying out agricultural production congregate in rural settlements, which traces the emergence of villages in the early stages of human development history. (Christian, Stokes, & Benjamin, 2014) Seven thousand years ago, farming was already present in the hilly Indus Valley in today's Pakistan, as well as in the Yellow and Yangtze River valleys in China, and about 5,000 years ago, farming was already the dominant way of life. The development of farming civilisations encouraged more people to cluster together and form villages, and the earliest documented village in the Euphrates valley, Abu Hureya, consisted of small, circular thatched huts sunk into the mud. Around 8800 BC, it developed into a large village, with rectangular houses built of mud-brick construction, with storage rooms on the ground floor and people living on the top floor. As for the Chinese countryside, it can be dated to the Eastern Han period (25-220), according to Cheng Xiaomin (2015). The chapter 33 of Wei Boyang's *Zhouyi Gentongqi* ('The Wonderful Uses of the Ding Weapon') reads: "Those who have attained longevity live in immortal villages are those being happy with the way of seeking its roots." This is the earliest occurrence in the book. The village is formed by a combination of rural dwellings, and the following is a clear overview of the development of rural dwellings in China based on the available literature.

## *2.2 Factors of China's rural development*

The earliest studies of rural dwellings in China began with the archaeological discipline and related source literature. Due to the large size of the country and the diversity of its geography and climate, early buildings took on different architectural forms to suit the local environment and geography, and these forms were mainly given different functions such as housing, wind protection, defence and earthquake protection. So far, the number of Neolithic cultural sites found exceeds that of known Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sites. (Shi Nianha 1959) Ancient people lived in various environments in riverine areas, such as the areas with plentiful water, dune areas, cave areas, hill pads and hills beside valleys, and grassland desert areas. According to Chinese archaeological research in 1955, the pocket cave of the Yangshao culture at Luoyang, Henan province, is a representative dwelling of this period, with small size but a relatively mixed solid layer of yellow ash and red burnt clay blocks at the base of the cave, topped by charcoal and vegetable ash with an uneven thickness of white ash surface, and an irregular oval-shaped white ash platform in the middle of the cave or being slightly off-centre. Lu Yuanding & Lu Qi (1999) pointed out that as the southeast coast is prone to typhoons and rainstorms, the three-sand clay walls, which are made of a mixture of shell ash, sand and clay, are protected against wind, rain and acidic corrosion; and Sichuan province is a high-earthquake prone area, so that the dwellings are mostly built with a through-drawer frame that is more integral and flexible, adapted to the terrain and conducive to earthquake resistance, which is determined by

the spatial distribution of disasters.

The changes in rural housing in China since the feudal society began in the 1930s during the Republican period. Zhang Bingfu (2006) concluded that the first representative of this period was Yan Yangchu, who had been engaged in rural construction for ten years in Ding County, Hebei Province, and created a rural scientific model; the second was Liang Shuming, who had been engaged in rural construction in Zouping County, Shandong Province for seven years. For a long time, he created the rural schooling model. The third is Lu Zuofu. He practised in the Beibei countryside of Chongqing for 20 years and created the rural modernization model. The rural construction ideas of these three representatives have important reference significance for modern rural construction. , solve farmers' problems with scientific methods, create a new culture based on traditional Chinese culture, and build new countryside with three specific methods of modern production methods and lifestyles After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China's agrarian society has undergone three stages of residential metamorphosis: the period of collectivisation, the period of reform and opening up and the new period of socialist modernisation. During the collectivisation period, rural housing emphasised the collectivisation of life, (Huang Yiru & Ye Lu, 2017a) evaluating that the concession of family attributes to collective living in rural housing during this period reached an extreme and led to an enlarged and abrupt change in the size of rustic housing collections and spatial homogeneity and monotony. During the reform and opening-up period, an intense immersion of urban culture began to be brought into rural dwellings, with rural housing forms passing from tile houses to buildings and from farmhouses to villas in phases, and villages tending to be neat and uniform. (Huang Yiru & Ye Lu, 2017b) The construction of the countryside during the period of modernisation began with Fei Xiaotong's early proposal of 'rustic China', which outlined that the country was the root of the entire Chinese society, and its construction shifted towards an economic path, emphasising a scientific and humanistic view of sociology (Fei Xiaotong, 2003).

Besides, in the new era of socialist modernization, the Chinese government has been injecting various aspects into rural construction, such as policies and systems, financial support and talent introduction. (Wang Xiaozui et al., 2020) proposed that to bridge the development gap between urban and rural areas and to solve the problems of unbalanced and inadequate urban and rural development, the Chinese government has gone through the "New Rural Construction", "Beautiful Countryside Construction" and "Rural Revitalisation Strategy", which have been successively reformed and deepened. From October 2005 to the present, the Chinese government has repeatedly stressed the issue of rural residents and the change in the living environment in critical national conferences and central documents. 2015 saw the construction of beautiful countryside, the improvement of hollow villages, the improvement of the rural living environment, the spatial reconstruction of towns and the narrowing of the gap between urban and rural areas. Here, it can be seen that the rustic housing design we are studying and exploring is not only the architectural form itself but integrated into the general social construction and development environment, combining political, economic, cultural, technological, scientific and sustainable development factors.

In the process of modernisation, the issue concerning traditional culture and the fate of the countryside has become even more prominent. In the view of Liang Shuming, who was a cultural conservative, Confucianism was the mainstream of Chinese agrarian civilisation, with its culture, rituals, and customs, as well as commerce and industry coming from the countryside

and being designed for the countryside". He believed that Chinese culture roots in the countryside. Other than that, Chinese scholars have conducted in-depth studies on traditional dwellings and groups of dwellings that have historical and humanistic values. For example, Luo Zhongzhao (2006) documented in detail the types and functions of modern village houses in his work. Sun Dazhang(2004) provided a detailed overview on the historical evolution, forms and categories of Chinese dwellings, and put forward rationalised conservation measures for existing buildings. Zhao Xudong & Sun Xiaofei (2017) reviewed the inherent characteristics and essence of rural culture and rethought the concept concerning transformation of Chinese rural culture. Zhang Jun (2018) explored several theories of rural values over the years and argued that rural values create the conditions for rural revitalization. Sun Yajie (2019) conducted a study on the application of vernacular elements in the context of beautiful countryside construction, while Suo Xiaoxia (2017) presented a re-understanding of the value of vernacular culture and the protection of vernacular culture diversity. Through 30 years of village changes in Huo Zhuang, Zhumadian City, Henan Province, Wang Jing and Li Xiaopeng (2016) analyzed the changes in architectural construction, functional layout planes, doors and windows, revealing that the reason for changes in rural architectural style is not the need for the building itself but the need for living activities and the rural changes caused by social and cultural guidance.

### *2.3 The impact of cities on rural residences*

The definition of the city, like that of the countryside, varies from one discipline to another (Mumford, 1961), stating that the city is the product of a combination of Neolithic and Palaeolithic cultures. Demography judges cities and their standards by the number and size of their populations. In addition, geography defines cities as areas of dense building and infrastructure and those distinct from rural spatial settlements, while sociology defines cities as the formation of a distinctive way of life that is urban in nature. Furthermore, most Chinese scholars generally agree with the alternative that the word 'city' was first used for its defensive function, while the word 'market' was adopted for bazaars and markets, where goods were exchanged, according to the Chinese word for 'city'. Beyond that, the cities that developed in each case were the inevitable result of socio-economic development, which is more relevant to the exploration of the urban architecture infiltration into rural dwellings in this paper.

Early urban studies and urban development planning, in which the development of the city was a combination of art and technology, were represented by E Howard's (1898) 'integrated planning' of the 'idyllic city' model and the 'urban beautification movement', based on aesthetic values. The three internationally recognised schools of urban morphology, namely the Cozen School in Britain, the Muratori-Cani Gaggia School in Italy and the Versailles School in France, all originated in Europe. However, there has been less local research on cities and urban architecture in China, with a large concentration of research beginning with the rapid urbanisation of China in the 1990s. Apart from that, the National Standard Urban Planning Terminology of the People's Republic of China defines "urbanisation" as "the process of transforming the human mode of production from the rural type to the urban type, manifested by the development and improvement of the city and the transformation of the rural population into the urban population". Rapid urbanisation represents a greater concentration of advanced technology and talents in cities. Yang Senping et al. (2014) empirically analysed the inverted



U-shaped relationship between urbanisation and the urban-rural income gap in China. Prove that the new urbanization development path is an inevitable choice to narrow the income gap between urban and rural areas in my country, Bai Nansheng(2003) believed that industrialisation drives urbanisation and attracts more employed people, whereas Ding Zuyu (2013) suggested that urbanisation is one of the core drivers of housing market development, with rural populations concentrating in small and medium-sized towns that move to cities and large cities, thus,forming the phenomenon of rural hollowing out.

#### *2.4 Theoretical research on rural construction*

In terms of theoretical guidance, the following books guided the construction of ancient Chinese homes. On a technical level, *The Method and Style of Construction* by Li Cheng in the Northern Song Dynasty (1103), which detailed the materials, construction and basic specifications for building dwellings according to a hierarchy, is one of the essential monographs on ancient Chinese architecture. Whereas, on a cultural level, *The Residence of the Yellow Emperor*, which is said to have been handed down from the time of the Yellow Emperor period (2717-2599 BC), is the most classic work and programmatic text in residential architecture and feng shui. The main lectures are on the harmonious coexistence between residential architecture and man, between man and heaven and earth, between man and nature, and between man and the universe, and the culture of feng shui in residential architecture has been used in modern architecture.

Contemporary theoretical research on rural construction focuses on the revival of the countryside through rural construction, with scholars generally summarising their experiences based on years of research and raising them to a theoretical level to guide policy promotion at the national level. In the 1930s, one of the representative figures was Liang Shuming who emphasised the uniqueness of Chinese culture, the country's wealth and strength built on the vast countryside, and the lack of group organisation and science and technology, Liang Shuming( 1998) advocated cultural construction, Wang Zhenzhuo(2017) evaluated his commitment to the application of Confucianism to social transformation, and pointed out that the root of the rural construction problem lies in the cultural disorder and ethical disorder generated by the disintegration of the original culture. In addition, Fei Xiaotong was also a representative figure of this period, and his academic research continued even longer into the 1990s. In the construction of the countryside, he stressed cultural transformation and economic transformation, attaching importance to the establishment of the country by industry, industry going to the countryside, and industry relieving the countryside. Apart from the economic development of the countryside and the development of small towns, cultural consciousness was also a social reflection on the development of the countryside, which can be called Fei Xiaotong's 'second academic life'.

### **3. Research on changes in housing brought about by the transformation of urban-rural relations**

According to Chinese economist Li Yining (2008), thirty years into the reform process, the biggest problem in China is the urban-rural relationship. As shown in the China Fiscal Policy Report 2010/2011 (2010), published by the Institute of Finance and Trade Economics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China's urbanisation is more of a "pseudo-urbanisation",

which refers to the fact that a large number of urban workers, although they live in cities and are counted as the urban population, have no urban household registration, still having contracted land, house bases and housing in rural areas, being not included in the urban housing and social security system and being unable to enjoy the same urban public services as citizens, with income and consumption levels being not equal to those of the general urban population. He Xuefeng (2006) considered this kind of urbanisation as 'slum urbanisation', pointing out that living in slums can increase the urbanisation rate of migrant workers, but it cannot really improve their quality of life. As marginalised groups in the city, the poor are not only unable to establish stable interpersonal ties but also incapable of forming effective expectations of the future.

### *3.1 The urban-rural binary opposition and its transformation*

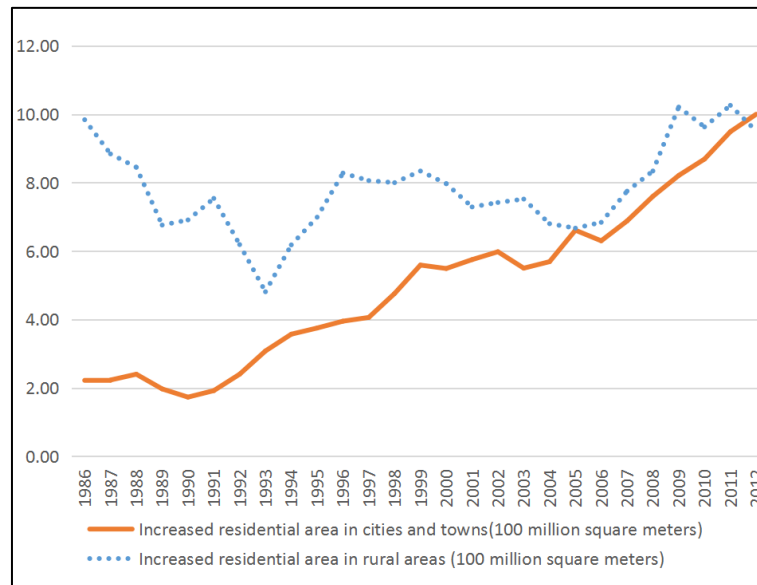
The urban-rural dichotomy in China is a concentrated manifestation of the division and the distinction between urban and rural areas. Huang Kun (2011) stated that China's habitat has a distinctly dualistic character, which is reflected in the fact that there are two different sets of policies for the development of habitats in urban and rural areas of China. From a sociological point of view, both 'urbanisation' and 'urbanisation of the countryside' imply the urban-centric discourse that takes the countryside as the antithesis of the city and emphasises its dependence on the emulation of the city. With the encroachment of urban sprawl on agricultural land and the destruction of the countryside's natural and human landscape by the influx of outsiders, how can the countryside avoid being eaten up by the consumerist boom? (Placide Rambaud, 1973) However, the process of urbanisation itself cannot be seen in isolation from the rural perspective, and it cannot be discussed without the rural reference point. Moreover, the transformation of rural society cannot be understood as the history of the countryside being influenced by or subjugated to the city but rather as the joint development of the countryside and the city through mutual influence and coordination. Faced with the above phenomenon of urban-rural dualism, the Chinese central government has been paying attention to it since the 16th Party Congress and has proposed a new urban-rural relationship that promotes a balanced allocation of resources between urban and rural areas and urban-rural integration through a long-term mechanism of promoting agriculture with industry and bringing rural areas with urban areas.

### *3.2 New opportunities for rural residence research*

The following data is sourced from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) for the last 35 years, 1986-2021, when both the proportion of the urban and rural population in China and the increase in housing areas are compared.

**Figures 1** Proportion of urban population and rural population (1986-2021)

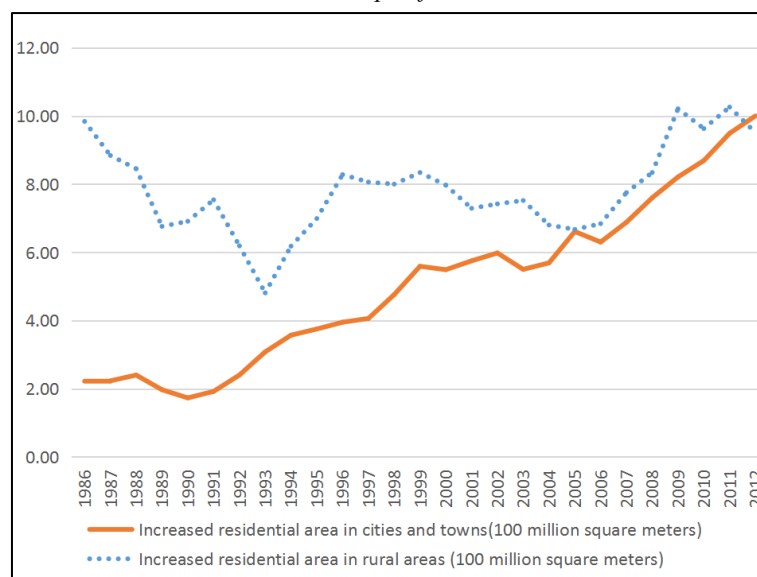
Source: Developed for this research



Figures 1 shows the ratio of the urban population to the rural population in mainland China for the 35 years from 1986 to 2021, with the rural population in a declining trend and the urban population in a rising situation. During this period, the year 2000 was the turning point in the change of the urban and rural populations. From this time onwards, the rate of increase and decrease accelerated, and after about ten years, urban and rural populations were equal by 2010, followed by the phenomenon of an increasing urban population and a decreasing rural population to date.

**Figures 2** Increase in residential area in urban and rural areas (1986-2012)

Source: Developed for this research





As can be seen from Figures 2, there is an overall upward trend in the area of additional dwellings in towns, while rural areas show a wavy graph, with the area of other houses in towns being smaller than that of additional dwellings in villages until 2011.

From the two-line graphs above, the rapid urbanisation in China in the last 35 years, with an increasing urban population and a decreasing rural population can be observed. As the National Bureau of Statistics only counts the increase in a residential area before 2013, the residential statistics for the last eight years are calculated according to the total area completed by real estate companies, without the distinction between urban and rural areas, so they are not covered here. In addition to that, some people believe that the sample is primarily households with fixed housing and household registration and that there are books questioning the fact that people who are in cities and featured with high mobility and little living space are not counted. But what can be affirmed here is that with rapid urbanisation, the number of rural housing units is not plummeting in the same way as that of people.

### *3.3 Design intervention of rural residences*

After the reform and opening up of China's rural housing, the sprawl of the countryside was characterised by the linear expansion of houses built along roads and the blocky expansion of residential bases extending outwards into villages, when rural housing architecture and design were mostly spontaneous and disorderly. Since the implementation of the Beautiful Countryside policy in 2015, more art and design have been incorporated into rural housing. Besides, Chen Runyang (2015) mentioned the main elements of beautiful countryside construction. Generally speaking, there are five basic elements in the construction of beautiful countryside: environment, life, culture, layout and mechanism. He Wei (2020) divided the designers into scholars, cross-borderers, especially artists, self-builders, architects of large design institutes and independent architects, and the types of rural residential building renovation design are mainly basic environmental improvement, residential house improvement and new residential exploration. Guan Ruijie (2016) stressed that the construction of beautiful villages should focus on "five lives", namely production capacity, ecological environment, ease of living, the beauty of life and production change, to achieve "five beauties that are industry, environment, life, humanity and harmony. (Fang, Li Li, 2018) believed that the significance of art intervention in the construction of beautiful villages rests with the revival of traditional Chinese "lifestyles" through art, the restoration of rural values, the transformation of "old culture into a new culture", and the promotion of the development of "rustic China" towards "ecological China".

## **4. Conclusion**

From the above literature, it can be seen that the study on traditional Chinese dwellings is generally based on the appreciation and praise of the technical and humanistic values of historical architecture, as well as the recognition of traditional culture and the unconscious national pride that flows from it. Unlike that, in the study of modern rural construction, more scholars have been seen to adopt a rescue mode of discussion, whether it is cultural rescue, economic support or policy support, and the current state of backwardness and the need for revival in rural China are also discovered. While modern urban architecture is slightly superior in terms of both architectural form and technical means, more scholars have begun to explore

the development path of rural housing from different levels and according to local conditions. The rural construction proposed by Fei Xiaotong should develop rural industrial construction. The development of rural industry also develops agriculture, and the economic development driven by this behavior also stimulates the development of small towns. These practical suggestions have been promoted and implemented in Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions of China and have achieved remarkable results. In contemporary China, a series of political measures such as beautiful countryside and rural revitalization have been promoted. These political measures have promoted the rural environment in these regions to renovate the village environment and integrate residential buildings. Elements such as technical art. At the same time, good results have also been achieved, which are valuable experiences worth learning from.

However, it must also be seen that the rapid development of urbanisation has created an urban-rural dichotomy, with a brain drain from the countryside and a bias towards the cities, which attract more human and financial resources. Fortunately, remedies are being found for this situation, and policies of urban-rural integration and mutual benefit between urban and rural areas are steadily being implemented. At the same time, China's rural residential environment is also changing from a blind imitation of urban space to "one village, one product" and the face of the village itself.

## **5. Future development trends**

Some scholars believe that China will have an urbanisation rate of up to 80%, like developed countries Gan Xinkui(2007), proposing the local 'urbanisation' of the countryside and launching the process of agricultural modernisation and the civilization of farmers. It seems that the only way of developing the countryside is to turn it into a city. If this is the case, the thousands of years of Chinese farming culture will be replaced by urban culture. Considering that, some Chinese scholars advocate the development of modern agriculture, sound management mechanisms, and science and technology to promote agriculture, and prosperity of rural culture in many ways to achieve harmonious development. Such a situation is certainly ideal, but the road is long, and hardships are now being experienced. It is hoped that the countryside will be one featured with its original cultural ecology as well as modern agriculture. In the future, China's countryside is developing the local economy while upgrading the rural living environment and living style is also imminent. In this case, it is time to integrate aesthetics, art, technology, and tourism, and combine traditional primary, secondary and tertiary industries, thus driving rural economic development and changing rural residences. This model of rural residences still needs to be explored, not only for theoretical support, but also for successful cases in different regions. Such models are irreplaceable and irreplaceable for urban architecture.

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