

# From Rural to Urban: Understanding Taobao Villages to Redress Planetary Urbanisation

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## Abstract

*This study examines Taobao Villages as an innovative model of urbanisation under China's planetary urbanisation framework. These rural communities, driven by the rise of e-commerce and digital infrastructure, have successfully integrated into the broader urban ecosystem by reconfiguring their historical socio-spatial legacies. Through Lefebvre's spatial triad framework, the research identifies three key historical legacies that underpin this transformation: (1) Collective Production Practices: Rooted in socialist collectivisation, these legacies include organisational capacity, efficient labour division, and shared property management. These factors facilitated the rapid adaptation of platform-based production systems. (2) Trans local Social Relations: Kinship and geographical ties fostered a strong capacity for collective action and socio-spatial embeddedness, enhancing community networks in a digitally connected era. (3) Adaptive Livelihood Customs: The region's history of resilience to Yellow River perturbations instilled flexibility in labour forms and migration capacities, enabling communities to thrive in volatile digital economies. The findings reveal that Taobao Villages challenge traditional urbanisation models by leveraging their unique historical contexts to develop diversified modes of production and connection. This research enriches planetary urbanisation theory by demonstrating how rural settlements, often overlooked, play a critical role in shaping urban ecosystems. By combining historical analysis with modern technological frameworks, it proposes a nuanced approach to understanding differential urbanisation patterns in the context of globalised production systems.*

**Keywords:** Planetary urbanisation, Taobao Villages, translocalism, digital e-commerce, rural-urban integration

## INTRODUCTION

### Planetary Urbanisation and China's Remote E-commerce Village Communities

Driven by Information and Communications Technology, digitally enhanced translocalism and mobilised territories reshape our understanding of cities, blurring traditional geographical boundaries. This transformation calls for a new urban epistemology to better explain and address this complex and fluid urbanisation process. *Planetary urbanisation*, is a perspective on *urban society* introduced by Brenner and Schmid [1], building upon Lefebvre's [2] work to grasp the constitutive processes of contemporary uneven polymorphic and variegated capitalist urbanisation. It suggests that the urban should be understood as an ever-evolving process of configuration, where both concentrated, extended, and differential dynamics integrate an ecosystem that continuously articulates inherited patterns and conditions.

This perspective has inspired research on previously overlooked non-urban areas, such as spaces of agriculture, resource extraction, and natural landscapes. However, while identifying and

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comparing these new differential modes of urbanisation is crucial, it is equally important to delve into these models through a historical analysis that considers the current technological framework to reveal how inherited differential social structures have been integrated into a broader platform capitalist apparatus. Such a perspective is particularly relevant to understanding contemporary China, where the long history of agrarian society and rapid urbanisation processes have produced and retained many differential modes of spatial production in steady conflicting alliance and collaborative contestation processes. Numerous rural communities, rich in sociospatial heritage, have resisted the rampant urbanisation of recent decades by developing unique strategies to integrate themselves into global production.

This study explores Taobao Villages, rapidly developed resistant rural communities that have become advanced production units for networked e-commerce, to redress the planetary urbanisation perspective. These villages are remarkable examples of the differential integration of contemporary urban ecosystems that reconfigure multilayered sociospatial heritage. Based on the spatial triad framework developed by Lefebvre and using the ethnographic method [3], this study conceptualises their translocal modes of heritage reconfiguration. The results suggest that Taobao villages may have developed a new kind of urban network integration through a reconfiguration of heritage in three areas: production practices (socialist collectivisation heritage), social relations (Asiatic community heritage), and adaptive culture (Yellow River perturbation heritage). The conclusion presents a reflection on the contribution of this study to the theory of planetary urbanisation, outlining a framework for further empirical research. Highlighting how these seemingly traditional rural settlements participate in broader urbanisation processes offers new insights into understanding contemporary diversified urbanisation patterns.

### **Taobao Villages on the North China Plain**

Since the dawn of the 21st century, e-commerce has burgeoned in China, encouraging numerous grassroots entrepreneurs to engage in manufacturing and online retail. Over the past decade, Alibaba, the group owning China's largest e-commerce platform, launched the "Rural Taobao" initiative. This programme, in response to the government's rural revitalisation and poverty alleviation schemes, has supported and integrated family- and community-based production across vast rural areas, leveraging the capacity of Taobao's online sale platform and the upgraded infrastructure of logistics and digital systems. Rural communities deeply involved in this programme have been designated as Taobao villages. The initiative has proven successful in locally reversing trends of rural depopulation, economic decline, and insufficient entrepreneurial capacity [4–7]. The growth in both the number and economic capability of these villages demonstrates the rapid and successful synergistic implementation of the government's rural revitalisation programme and Alibaba's Taobao village initiative: from three instances in 2009 to 212 in 2014, and further to 7,023 in 2021, the total number of Taobao villages has come to represent 1% of the country's total administrative villages [8].

The characteristics of the over 7,000 Taobao villages are vastly diverse, with one of the most apparent differences being their locations. Given the superior economic vitality and sound infrastructure conditions of cities, proximity to large and medium-sized urban clusters is the most crucial factor in the siting of many Taobao villages. Most Taobao villages follow the logic of *borrowed size*, whereby villages adjacent to cities can leverage the agglomeration advantages of their larger neighbours whilst avoiding agglomeration costs [9, 10]. This polarised locational distribution, however, presents a notable exception: a significant number of clusters of Taobao villages situated in the North China Plain (NCP) far from major urban areas. Preliminary observations on these clusters reveal that they comprise long-established rural settlements that are densely and evenly distributed and host to a substantial rural population.

This phenomenon indicates that, at least from the perspective of relative position to major cities, Taobao village localisation may follow a different logic. To explore it, we draw on a theoretical framework designed to explain unprecedented processes characterising contemporary diffused urbanisation at the global scale: planetary urbanisation [1, 11, 12]. We focus on remote NCP clusters

and attempt to grasp the unique conditions that have led to their success through historical analysis. Subsequently, we trace three different historical periods of the region from three perspectives: the transformation of production practices, particularly in relation to the constitution of the villages during socialist collectivisation; the evolution of social relations, focusing on the heritage of historic Asiatic rural communities; and the development of territorialisation modes, concentrating on structural and everyday life and cultural disruptions consequent to the history of recurrent Yellow River's perturbations. This retrospective analysis establishes a research framework that conceptualises the common characteristics of specific historical periods and current modes of production, thereby identifying determinant socio-spatial legacies.

## **DIFFERENTIAL URBANISATION: THREE TYPES OF LEGACY**

### **Multiscalar Collective Production Practices: The Legacy of Socialist Collectivisation and the Market System**

Following the completion of the revolution and the establishment of New China, the Communist Party-led state introduced transformational reforms in the rural sector to develop agricultural productivity through profound policies and government practice reforms focusing on socioeconomic and technical aspects [13, 14]. The main goal, hinging on collectivisation and equity principles, comprised increasing collaboration through the concentration of dispersed labour, means of production, and land, and the organisation of collective production driven by shared political vision. During this period, community members were required to live and work together in reciprocity, collaboratively engaging in advancing agricultural and manufacturing production. Concurrently, the state implemented major enhancements by mobilising these organised collectives in the hydrological and irrigational infrastructure, which in the NCP region promote agricultural productivity and mitigate water-related disaster mainly caused by the Yellow River and the Huai River [15].

#### ***Legacy Characteristics***

1. *Organisation*: advanced capacity to manage community-based collective institutions, means and cultures of production that expand beyond the village level. This necessitates the transition from family- and small plot-based agricultural production to communal and collaborative production, praising collective production whilst engaging multiscalar forms of production.
2. *Division of labour*: increased capacity to moderate collective labour to narrow differences between labour divisions, adopting a non-monetised “work point” system to coordinate production and distribution within communes in relation to intra- and inter-regional relations.
3. *Shared ownership*: enhanced collective labour practices for managing means of production, with communities needing specific institutions, negotiations, and cultures to mediate relationships between people and property that include multiscalar geographical dimensions, as in the case of large water infrastructure [13, 16, 17].

#### ***Potential Impacts of This Legacy on Taobao Production***

The combination of the enhanced ability of such communities to autonomously coordinate collective labour, including organising production and division of labour, and managing shared ownership of means of production, and the remarkable infrastructural endowment constitute the foundation for the rapid and smooth adoption of platform-based autonomous multiscalar practices of e-commerce. When the legacy of collective production practices encounters contemporary market-oriented trends, conflict management and alliance capabilities are potentially adapted to facilitate the development of the market-driven economy:

1. *Organisation tendency*: This legacy overcomes the conservatism of small-scale production, encouraging villagers to continuously consider integrating various production factors within and outside the village, fostering tendencies towards expanded reproduction and industrial upgrading.
2. *Division of labour tendency*: This legacy encourages members to participate in differentiated community production according to individual strengths, promoting diversity in community production and extending the industrial chain to inter- and infra-regional scales.

3. *Community property sharing tendency*: This legacy may yield the most contradictory results. The notion of “everyone having a share” on one hand enhances members’ sensitivity to Unauthorized misappropriation and unequal allocation of overall community property, whilst on the other hand strengthening members’ emulation in production, including replication in product design, production techniques, and sales methods.

### **Translocal Social Relations: The Legacy of Asian Rural Community Kinship and the Modern Digitally Enhanced, Expansive Geographical Networks**

Chinese rural communities, prototyped on Marx’s concept of *Asiatic communities*, are characterised by isolated, comprehensive self-unity and spatiotemporal stability. The commonality of these naturally formed tribal communities stems from families/lineages based on shared bloodlines, language, and customs [18]. Ancient Chinese villages were often composed of one or several lineages, with the village size determined by the extent of arable land. Villages were relatively isolated from each other due to self-sufficient agricultural production within the village. In short, kinship relations involve family, lineage, and clan, whilst geographical relations involve the proximity of daily life and property ownership. Importantly, in the post-revolution era, these two major relationships were preserved but their relational systems were expanded to the regional and national scales. Due to the strategic localisation and outsized infrastructural endowment, in the NCP region their important functions and characteristics in the social structure, primarily manifested in the capacity for collective action among individuals and the ability to form deeply rooted sociospatial embeddedness, are customarily extended on translocal dimensions.

#### ***Legacy Characteristics***

1. *Capacity for collective action among individuals*: kinship and geographical relations strengthen the capacity for collective action among individuals through emotional bonds, shared interests, value sharing, resource sharing, and information exchange with translocal dimensions.
2. *Individual capacity for extended sociospatial embeddedness*: within kinship and geographical relations, individuals’ place attachment is expressed as emotional belonging and dependence on specific territories that expand across localities. This attachment is not merely a perception of geographical space but also includes emotional investment in social relations, historical memories, and cultural identities. In summary, these relationship legacies persist today in the form of customs, rituals, and festivals, as well as in spaces such as fields, buildings, streets, and graves. State institutions have also left room for preserving these relationship legacies, for example, by recognising the collective ownership of rural communities over their land and buildings and acknowledging the blood-based transmission of rural community membership rights that, in the NCP region, have cross-locality character.

#### ***Potential Impacts of this Legacy on Taobao Production***

The preservation of traditional relationships such as kinship and geographical ties in rural communities, and their diffusion within urban-rural relationship networks strengthened by digital technology and transport infrastructure, may have propelled the emergence of local Taobao production.

1. *Capacity for collective action among individuals*: This legacy can enhance the efficiency of integrating various resources such as human capital, funding, and technology in the entrepreneurial process, whilst providing mutual psychological support and risk-sharing.
2. *Individual capacity for extended socio-spatial embeddedness*: This legacy can drive the flow of factors towards rural areas within urban-rural relationship networks, becoming a conduit for the reverse transfer of knowledge, skills, and production from cities to rural areas. Simultaneously, it can inspire members’ sense of belonging and responsibility, encouraging individuals to invest more resources and emotions in returning home to start businesses.

### **Transcultural Embedded Customary Adaptation: The Legacy of Livelihood Customs Shaped by Yellow River Fluctuations**

The NCP region is a densely populated region historically plagued by major floods. Floods often destroyed farmland, houses, and infrastructure, leading to large-scale displacement of people, severe

loss of life and property, and hindered economic development. People often had to seek flexible and diverse means of survival to endure, shaping the region's unique social culture.

### ***Legacy Characteristics***

1. *Capacity to adjust labour forms*: frequent flooding and course changes of the Yellow River led to frequent alterations in agricultural production conditions. In some cases, sediment brought by floods would improve soil quality, making the land more suitable for cultivation [19]. In other cases, property ownership, irrigation facilities and water conservancy projects were destroyed, whilst soil salinisation, alkalization, tributary extinction, and waterlogging would devastate agricultural infrastructure. Residents had to develop multimodal strategies and tactics to support their lives, which included handicrafts, fishing, hunting, and gathering wild vegetables [20].
2. *Capacity for migration*: due to unstable natural conditions, it was difficult to form stable and gradually expanding settlements in this area. Poor production and living conditions forced farmers in flood-prone areas to become accustomed to migration, seeking seasonal supplies elsewhere. Sometimes entire villages would relocate. Some would return to rebuild homes and reclaim farmland after major disasters.

### ***Potential Impacts of This Legacy on Taobao Production***

1. *Capacity to culturally adapt and adjust labour forms*: This legacy adapts to the platform's requirements for flexible production, enhancing entrepreneurs' ability to adapt to market changes, making them more innovative and resilient.
2. *Capacity for migration*: This legacy can help entrepreneurs acquire more resources and information through diverse urban cultural environments and social networks, expanding connections and market insights, thereby promoting entrepreneurial innovation and opportunity recognition.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The research findings suggest that the potential productive, relational, and customary legacies of the densely clustered Taobao villages in the North China Plain help explain why, when focusing on the dimensions of the concentrated and expanded in planetary urbanisation, it is necessary to give equal attention to Lefebvre's spatial triad from a historical analysis perspective. From these three aspects, communities are shaped by geographical and historical differences into vastly diverse characteristics, which precisely constitute the conditions for differential urbanisation. The unique historical legacies in this case study, including multiscale, translocalism and transculturalism, enable these rural communities to retain enormous entrepreneurial potential even when far from cities, subverting the logic of borrowed size. Specifically, the potential socio-spatial legacies in local Taobao villages are identified as follows:

1. Regarding production, the legacy of multiscale socialist collectivisation includes organisational capacity, division of labour capacity, and shared property capacity that introduces the village into a complex system of intra- and inter-regional relations. These three capacities may have strengthened the collective production practices of Taobao villages under current market conditions.
2. At the social relationship level, the legacy of translocally consolidated kinship and geographical ties in traditional rural communities includes the capacity for collective action among individuals and the ability to form deeply rooted sociospatial embeddedness across localities. These two capacities may have enhanced the advantages of Taobao villages in constructing social relationships in an era of highly connected, digitally enhanced infrastructure.
3. Regarding customary practices and everyday life, the legacy of transcultural adaptive livelihood strategies and tactics to cope with the Yellow River perturbations informs the ability to adjust labour forms for livelihood and the capacity to migrate for sustenance. These two abilities may have helped local Taobao villages maintain resilience in the highly volatile digital economy market.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on case studies, this research provides a historical analysis method for examining diverse forms of urbanisation, complementing the planetary urbanisation perspective. This method requires first

grasping the unique characteristics of a specific mode of production within a territory based on preliminary research, then attempting to trace the origins and key moments of various features through an examination of local history. By conceptualising the common characteristics of history and the present, potential socio-spatial legacies are uncovered. These legacies may occur in at least three intertwined levels across various time periods: practical, relational, and everyday life. This allows for the construction of a context-specific examination framework. Furthermore, it is necessary to conduct in-depth research on this mode of production based on the indicators in the research framework, evaluating how it is integrated into the current production system. The advantage of this method is that it emphasises both the specificity and universality of a particular mode of production when depicting it.

In summary, this method re-emphasises the in-depth study of differential patterns under planetary urbanisation through historical analysis, combining it with current technological frameworks. This approach aids in rediscovering and emphasising potentially secondary contradictions by identifying local specific characteristics.

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