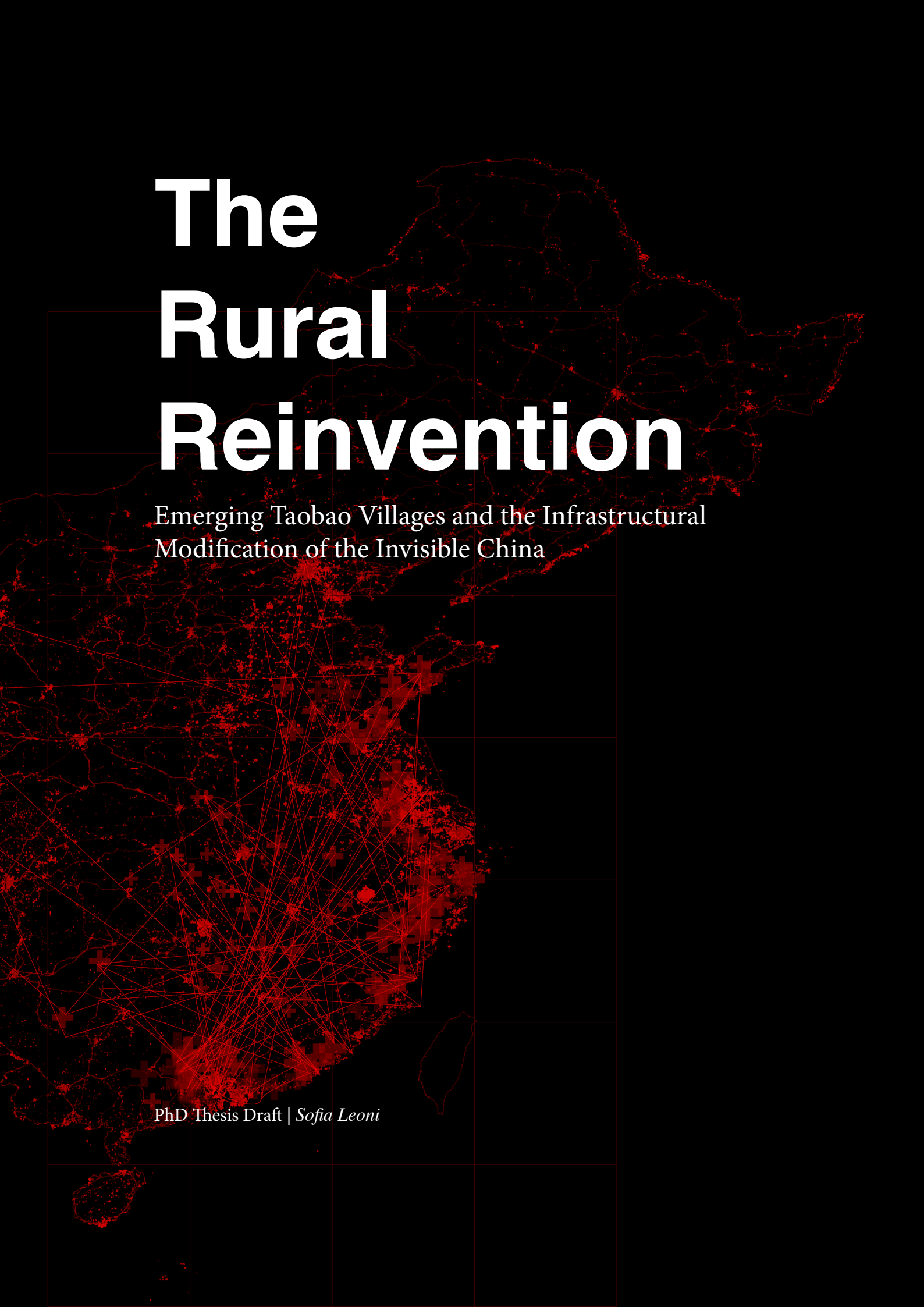




The Rural Reinvention

Emerging Taobao Villages and the Infrastructural
Modification of the Invisible China

PhD Thesis Draft | *Sofia Leoni*



Doctoral Dissertation.
Interuniversity Doctoral Program in
Urban and Regional Development (XXXVIII Cycle)

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Emerging Taobao Villages and the Infrastructural Modification of the Invisible China

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30 January 2026



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Turin, Month xx, 20xx

Summary

This research agenda investigates how the entanglement of logistics and platform practices produces new forms of space and inhabitation, foregrounding the opaque condition of non-Western ruralities, namely Rural China, which has long been theorized – and treated – as “invisible”. Rather than considering it as a hinterland, a backward of urban modernity, the aim is to position *Rural China* as a distinctive arena where globalization materializes from below.

The central object of inquiry is a major public–private initiative that led to the emergence of so-called Taobao Villages, or e-commerce villages. These are rural administrative settlements in which annual e-commerce transactions exceed 10 million RMB and at least ten percent of households engage in online business. Rather than treating them as virtuous rural development models to be emulated, this made-in-China phenomenon is examined as an inconspicuous space of globalization. The aim is to develop a spatial reading that moves beyond corporate definitions and policy benchmarks, foregrounding instead the heterogeneous, situated, and contested socio-spatial dynamics that underpin their emergence. On this basis, the study is structured around two main questions which, although analytically distinct, are deeply interconnected. The first examines the transformation of rural space resulting from the expansion of digital platforms and logistics infrastructures. The second, conversely, interrogates the logistics-infrastructure debate itself, questioning how it has been mobilized to interpret peripheral and marginal territories often described as being “off the map.” To date, the working hypothesis that animates this thesis is that labor functions as a form of

infrastructure capable of reconfiguring space, production, and everyday life, and it is this assumption that drives the analysis.

Organized through a circular narrative, the *first section* contextualizes the “rural” question by examining transformations in *rural China*, tracing theoretical and conceptual shifts from the Maoist commune to contemporary changes and engaging with current debates on *planetary ruralization*. With the same aim of unpacking the big issue of the phenomena investigated, the *second section* looks at the *logistics paradigm*, *platform practices*, their debates and impacts, understood as projects to control the flow and movement of bodies, materials, goods, and finances. After positioning the field of research, the *third section* finally presents *Taobao villages*, exploring their spatial growth and patterns, illustrated through infographics, quantitative data (statistics and trends), and mapping. Finally, the fourth section, in the form of an atlas, offers a detailed description of two Taobao villages, representing outcomes of different urbanization processes and places, through the examination of their *socio-spatial dynamics* and *micro-stories*: Junpucun (Guangdong province), specialized in clothing and leather products, Dongfeng (Jiangsu province) specialized in furniture and fake Ikea products, investigated mainly through fieldwork, by employing different techniques, mainly cartographic readings, semi-structured interviews, participant observation. The *conclusion*, overall, returns to the starting point – but with something different. While it raises questions on some of the dynamics occurring with the digital turn in Rural China, specifically exploring what remains rural, what does not, and whether new ruralities are emerging, it proposes the initial hypothesis of reinvention as twofold. On the one hand, both rural labor and spaces are being reinvented. They are not merely constructed; rather, they represent an act of producing something new based on existing elements. Following the traditional socio-spatial organization of rural China, a new project of coexistence emerges. This project aligns with the counter-urbanization trend, where *rural-to-urban migrants* return to the countryside, reshaping spaces and habits. This phenomenon merges

traditional patterns of socio-spatial organization with new forms of entrepreneurship. At the same time, the concept of infrastructure itself is also being redefined. What is evident here extends beyond the technical domain to encompass various social frictions. In Taobao villages, although some processes may appear automated, the underlying structure relies on human infrastructure – a concept introduced by Abdoumalik Simone, which emphasizes the economic collaboration among residents who are often marginalized and impoverished by urban life. Thus, the rural narrative is expanded, allowing us to assert that infrastructures themselves might be ruralized.

By foregrounding these inconspicuous spaces and the platformization from elsewhere they embody, the research frames Taobao Villages as laboratories of contemporary globalization, where economic processes are reconfigured through domestic infrastructures, informal logistics, and rural reinventions of dwelling, work, and circulation in an age of planetary urbanisation. Approaching this phenomenon through the lens of architecture and urbanism therefore means not only describing its present configurations, but distilling the spatial logics that sustain them, to articulate a project for a new rural China. This is understood as a project of relation and coexistence, in which growth is not merely quantitative but redefines how rurality engages with globalization. In this way, the study contributes to a critique of planetary urbanization by showing how Taobao Villages unsettle the assumption that rurality is simply absorbed by urban logics. Instead, they demonstrate the capacity of peripheral spaces to generate new infrastructural centralities, articulate alternative forms of connectivity, and embed platform economies within domestic and informal practices. Read through the intertwined processes of ruralization, hybridization, and reinvention, Taobao Villages emerge as socio-spatial processes through which a new form of rural space becomes visible.

Rural China, Infrastructure-led ruralization, Logistics, Platforms, Taobao Villages

