



## City profile

## City profile: Suzhou - a Chinese city under transformation

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## ABSTRACT

Suzhou is located at the center of lower Yangtze River Delta (YRD). With a history of more than 2500 years, it has been transformed from a famous national commercial city in history to a vanguard of globalization known as a modern industrial city in contemporary China. It was not until the reform and opening in 1978 that the traditional spatial structure of the city was jeopardized. It has become an industrial base of Shanghai and relied on foreign direct investment and foreign trade remarkably through a new industrialization path of constructing development zones at various levels. Paralleling economic growth, it has exhausted massive agricultural land and caused rampant urban sprawl because spatial planning was not effective in development control. However, spatial planning does play an important role in the conservation of the ancient quarter which made Suzhou another model in the country. Lastly, some issues and challenges ahead in planning and governance are also discussed.

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## Introduction

Suzhou is located in the west of Shanghai and in the center of lower YRD. With the Yangtze River to its north and Tai Lake to its southwest, its total area is 8487.7 km<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1). The municipality is dotted by a number of hills along the Tai Lake in the southwest, the highest one of which is the Qionglu hill (342 m). Elsewhere, the whole municipality is quite flat, being only two to three meters above the sea level. Suzhou is famous for its livable environment, developed economy and delicate Chinese classical gardens. With an urban history of 2500 years accumulating a large number of famous historic sites, buildings and stories, the city is protected in the list of Chinese Famous Historic and Cultural City. Moreover, it is also privileged by beautiful natural and human landscapes, such as the scenic belt along Tai Lake and waterside townships.

Suzhou was recognized nationally as a leading commercial hub and grain production base in history. In modern China, Suzhou was forced to open and suffered ups and downs, as one forefront of struggles. However, in contemporary China, as one of the vanguards of globalization in the country, it has transformed into an industrial city. Along its way of industrialization and globalization, Suzhou has been extensively documented in the literature, with respect to its socio-spatial attributes of information and communication technology (ICT) industry clustering (Wei, Liefner, & Miao,

2011; Wei, Yuan, & Liao, 2013), path of industrial upgrading (Ma & Fan, 1994; Wei, 2002; Wei, Lu, & Chen, 2009), as well as local economic and spatial governance responses (Chien, 2008, 2013; Luo, Zhen, & Yin, 2011; Yang & Wang, 2008). However, there is lack of a comprehensive introduction of Suzhou's transformation and the roles of spatial planning in recent development. Particularly, the expansion of development zones also shows how the city has embarked on economic globalization.

Adding to those Chinese cities such as Hong Kong (Cullinane & Cullinane, 2003), Macau (Tang & Sheng, 2009), Shanghai (Wu, 1999), Shenzhen (Ng, 2003), Guangzhou (Xu & Yeh, 2003) and Qingdao (Zhang & Rasiah, 2013) which have been documented already, Suzhou, as an ancient city now has declined into a secondary city in the Chinese city system, shows some differences in its development trajectory towards modernization and urbanization. This profile primarily focuses on the city proper of Suzhou, while also discusses the whole municipality when relevant. It firstly introduces the city's historical development, followed by a detailed discussion on the socio-spatial transformation since China's open door policy in 1978. Then, the role of spatial planning in development control and ancient city conservation is also investigated. Some remaining issues and challenges are discussed in the last part.

## Historical development

Like many other ancient Chinese cities, Suzhou as an urban entity was born out of military needs (Chen, 1995). It was built

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in 514 BC by Helü, the king of Wu, with the name of Dacheng. By the late Qin dynasty (221–207 BC), a county government unit was established in Suzhou. Located with excellent conditions of subtropical climate and water network, Suzhou developed a highly productive sector of rice cultivation. It has been always regarded as one of the richest places in history. It developed rapidly as many people migrated from the Yellow River Basin to the south during the politically-unstable Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 AD). However, Suzhou's golden age of development did not arrive until the Sui Dynasty (581–618 AD), when the city was linked to other major Chinese cities to its north after the completion of the Great Canal (an old trade artery connecting Beijing and Hangzhou). It soon became a gateway of grain transportation from East China to North China.

Subsequently, Suzhou had become one of the national economic centers of trade, textile industry and handicraft industry (Chen, 1995). For example, the Suzhou-style embroidery produced in the city has been famous for centuries. Various elegant private gardens were built by the leading merchants and retired officials during the Song dynasty (960–1279 AD). The private garden construction reached its zenith during the Ming-Qing period (1368–1840 AD). As the Chinese old saying goes, “in heaven is paradise; on earth are Suzhou and Hangzhou”. Representing the Chinese garden's highest level of artistic merit, nine Suzhou classical gardens were added to the World Heritage List.

However, the geographical advantage of Suzhou was eroded when Shanghai was forced to open to foreign traders after the First Opium War (1840–1842). Afterwards, supported by the influx of overseas capital, Shanghai replaced Suzhou as China's national economic center. In 1895, the imperial government also opened Suzhou as a result of its defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). A

barren site in front of the south gate of the Suzhou city wall was leased to Japan for industrial and commercial uses. The site soon developed into a cluster of cotton mills and commercial facilities due to its proximity to the Great Canal, which resulted in a urban form very different from that of the traditional family-based and low-density one within the city wall (Chen, 2003). The flood of foreign capital, on the one hand, undermined the foundation of the conventional silk and textile industries based on small scale production; on the other hand it introduced modern technologies to and fostered the ascend of modern capitalism in China (Chen, 1995). However, just after a decade, the city's economic center was relocated to the north. The new center was served by the Suzhou-Shanghai section of the Shanghai-Nanjing railway after its opening in 1906, a time when railway began to override the canal with its efficiency to dominate the inter-city transportation market in China.

Suzhou developed rapidly during the First World War (1914–1918) and it was the birthplace of Chinese modern industry (Chen, 1995). However, owing to subsequent turmoil caused by Japanese invasion and occupation (1937–1945), and civil war (1945–1949), Suzhou's development experienced up and downs. Meanwhile, the tourism industry emerged as a new economic sector in the city because Suzhou is rich in tourism resources and endowed with livable environment (Chen, 2003). On 27 April 1949, Suzhou was taken over by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Under the centrally planned economy, Suzhou's economy was primarily dominated by people's communes, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and collectively-owned enterprises after the completion of the Three Great Reconstructions (*san da gaizao*), a central government campaign to nationalize or collectivize sectors of agriculture, handicraft production and capitalist industry and commerce in 1956. Like many commercial cities at that period,



Fig. 1. The location of Suzhou (F9, F11 and F13 in the map represent the locations of Figs. 9, 11 and 13).

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