



A Country's Side

Notes on Chinese rural development

China is big, China is fast, China is develop-ing, emerg-ing, grow- ing, export-ing, import-ing, influenc-ing, impress-ing, ...the list of the country's achievements is a long and ever-expand-ing one. The prosperous, and somewhat chubby, modern Chinese metropolis has finally taken its long overdue seat at the world- class cities' banquet. The dazzling Chinese development, praised by some and criticized by others, is undeniable. Yet, the ecstatic and long awaited triumph of the nation is not without dramatic side effects. Progress needs sacrifices! Nothing should interfere with the all-too-mighty economic growth. Environmental, cultural and social realms are increasingly put under pressure and considered as collateral issues. The slick facades of the new metropolis, however glittery, cannot wholly conceal the gloomy reality of a rural population left aside and struggling for

survival. Mao's dream and obsession of a countryside leading the nation's modern revolution and breaking away from its dependency on the city has been literally washed away by the frenzy of capitalistic development. The gap is growing bigger; urban and rural territories are inexorably shifting apart.

The economic boom fueling the urban centers' exponential development hasn't yet reached their "peripheries". Harsh living conditions and the lack of any kind of prospect leave the people with no choice. In 2011 alone, more than 221 millions people- 16% of the total population- were migrant workers moving temporarily to the urban and industrial areas to find jobs. It is estimated that by 2025, 300 millions farmers will have permanently moved to the cities (or the cities will have moved to them...). The scale of both temporary and definitive migrations emphasizes the incredible demographic and spatial transformations occurring in China. The country's political and social agenda couldn't be clearer: transform China into a "harmonious modern urban society". Massive displacements of rural communities, expropriations, violent demolitions of housings, land use transfers, alongside gargantuan market-driven development, tabula rasa urbanization, relocations and pro-migration policies, are enforced on a daily basis in China. Out of a common accord, urbanization has become the ultimate tool for progress.

Ironically, while the metropolis myth is at its climax and increasingly taking possession of the country's sides, an urban mutiny is on the rise. Almighty urbanism is under pressure! The intrinsic paradox of cities as man's greatest and worst living environment is re-emerging and stronger than ever. The alienating urban monster is in crisis, its inhabitants discontented with traffic, pollution, exhaustion, inflation, security, tensions, ... The environmental, social and economical sacrifices it relentlessly demands from them is becoming increasingly unbearable. A *vent de panique* is blowing on the planners, the architects, the politicians, the real estate tycoons, as if their grand urban machine was starting to burst. On the one

hand, urbanites fantasize about going back to the countryside's quality of life (i.e. the rise of suburbia), on another, villagers are tightly constrained to transform into a smaller version of the modern city. While some proclaim the crisis of the city and fetishize the green urban revolution, others, almost violently, summon the countryside, the only place where some kind of balance between man and his natural environment still exists, to get back in line.

The question is obviously not to repudiate development as a whole neither to retract in some kind of hazardous nostalgia. It is essential to be progressive and resolutely enthusiastic toward the possibility of change. Hence, the scale and the urgency of rural transformation in China is too important to be based on simplistic thinking. Neither urban skepticism nor blind faith in outdated models of what constitutes and what does not constitute a city are relevant. The manichean rural-urban dialectic is not only obsolete but also too rigid to generate the much-needed new strategies. The question is not whether to celebrate or vilify the metropolitan space, nor is it to romanticize the countryside or declare its death-sentence. Can the city save the village? No. Can the village save the city? No. No one has to be "saved"!



Toward a new
rural landscape

The “Side” Effect

Hangover and urban contraband

The massive rural exodus and the current urbanization fever highlight the belief in which the countryside is constantly perceived as a synonym for backwardness, traditionalism, and poverty. The perennial dichotomy between a supposedly backward-looking countryside and a forward-looking city has never been so strong. As if any type of alternative was unforeseeable, the village is doomed... long lives the city! Urban conquest has become the ultimate model and the unquestionable standard of development; it's the only route to progress. Villages are uncritically concretized, brickified, tiled, glazed, and sugarcoated with all the symbols of urban revolution and modern transformation.

The country's logic is very straightforward: first develop the cities and then spread the recipe of success to the countryside. Develop the “centers” and then develop the “sides”. This top-down or center-side approach, characteristic of the country's long history of governance and planning, assumes that focusing on urban areas will not only guarantee efficiency and speed but will also trigger a direct positive snowball effect on their “dependencies”. Yet, the centers have become increasingly reluctant to share their wealth and their achievements with the sides. The city is under the impression of dragging the countryside and the countryside feels desperately left aside. The centers need the sides to help them build and sustain their hegemony and the sides need the centers to be strong enough to radiate enough support for their own development. Rural areas almost entirely depend economically, politically, and spatially on the cities. The center always decides for the sides. Cities choose what should be done in the countryside, what can be done and how it will be done. Either by providing the needed flow of cheap labors into the city, or seeing their dwellings deserted or destroyed, their environment polluted, their communities disintegrated, their culture dismissed, the sacrifices country- sides are making are tremendous.

The *waidiren* [外地人, “outside people”], as they are called in the cities, are not only denied the chance to join the gargantuan urban orgy but are forced to cope with its constant hangover.

As if cities were the only ones allowed to lead progress, the countryside is compelled to spread and copy the new development models without the time or the knowledge to assimilate and adapt them. In a situation of perpetual urgency, there is no time and no willingness to question the *modus operandi*. Most developments in the sides seem to be limited to the manufacturing of some kind of sub-products of what is happening in the centers. Smaller, cheaper, messier versions of the urban apparatus are mushrooming along the new roads leading from one city to the other. A somewhat exciting but also alarming urban contraband is in effect.



Urban contraband

Qingshui town, Gansu, 2010 - Residential urban blocks slowly taking hostage the rammed earth village at their feet

In a society so passionately concerned with *mianzi* [面子, “face”], a concept one could translate as “social appearance” or the visible “face” ensuring public respectfulness, the signs of modernity are as important, if not more, as its essence. Even in the most remote parts of the country, an incredible effort is put on showing explicitly rural transformation. The show is not directed by meaningful and serious endeavors but rather by obvious progress gimmickry, grandiloquent façadism, and urban maquillage. Architects and planners, when they are involved at all, conveniently abandon their social responsibility and retrench themselves in becoming eccentric aestheticians applying layers of fresh makeup on top of what is intrinsically a brutal imposition of the urban order. “If it looks like a city, then it must be a city!” Market pressure coupled with economical and political profitability, and the holy value of *newness*, result in an almost exhibitionist updating policy where copy-and-paste has become the rule. New villages built on *tabula rasa* resemble hazardous suburban districts, rows of parallel residential compounds in the so-called new towns alarmingly reminds us of ghetto blocks, and the glazed facades of yet-to-come businesses barely hide their vacancy or their temporary use as agricultural storages. The copycat urban avatars certainly carry the signs of urbanism but utterly fail to recreate its exhilarating substance.

The Wild Side

Scientifically irrational

In reaction to the visible chaos and the magnitude of the changes necessary for the country’s side – to improve its living conditions, dynamize its economy, and develop it to its full potential – China has fully embraced “planning”. Five-year plans after five-year plans, leaders have been setting up objectives, deciding priorities and drawing the roadmaps to follow. Not only have they declared what needs to be done but also how it should be done: “implement a scientific concept of development and planning”. The importance attached to a “scientific” process is understandable in a country where

it is difficult to count on either tangible facts or stable conditions. The center must be able to rely on steady grounds to trigger the required fast improvements and, in the meantime, take back control of the society’s fringes. It should come as no surprise that a regime led by technocrats and mostly engineer-trained deciders, should have such a strong belief in science and pragmatic planning approaches.

Scientific planning relies on the implementation of a series of protocols. Things are prepared, scheduled, arranged, predetermined, in such a manner that by following the initial formula, one cannot but fulfill the intended ambition and prove the initial hypothesis. To base rural development -and planning in general- on scientific methods means to agree in the first place with the paradigm and the doctrines that founded them. Science historian Thomas Kuhn defines the scientific paradigm as: “Universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of researchers”. Thus, in effect, scientific planning entails that it is already agreed: “what is to be observed and scrutinized, the kind of questions that are supposed to be asked, how these questions are to be structured and how the results of the scientific investigations should be interpreted.” The methods and the results are not to be questioned: the planner, a first class citizen, simply knows better. No dialogue is possible; the protocol cannot be disturbed!



Planners?

Scientific planning doesn't accept exceptions to the rule; it eradicates or dismisses any type of difference or outside-the-box behavior. Scientific planning ignores the complex equilibrium between irrational and rational, formal and informal, free and controlled, pragmatism and idealism, which have always constituted cities. Instead, imposed architectural and urban models are at best -or at worst- camouflaged with local decorations and reminiscences of vernacular local styles. Parallel rows of almost identical new houses in the same tidied up barrack style's layout spring up all across China. A new proper-order is imposed, new proper-aesthetics validated, and new proper-lifestyle promoted. Old villages used to be messy and heterogeneous, dirty and inefficient, unplanned and subversive; the new villages are clean, ordered, homogeneous, efficient and under control.



Scientific planning
New socialist countryside
 天下第一村
 Huaxicun, "First village
 under the sky"

But is it –truly- under control? The reality of the countryside is somehow much less reasonable than what the official line might want it to be. Either because of the general disengagement of the public sector, or due to the irresponsible pursuit of short-term profit, a strange type of self-sabotage has been set in motion. Urbanism

as we knew it has perished in the urban-rural conflict. An unspoken conspiracy between political power and market lobbyist has given birth to a corrupted type of urbanism. One of the main sources of income for local government being land sales, they recklessly map maximized zoning-like land divisions and hastily sell the pieces to the private sector who will happily carry out the highly profitable projects. Obviously, the back door remains wide open to particularly generous developers who are willing to slip thick envelopes under the table. Urban planning used to be a very costly affair, now it's miraculously become a steady cash flow for local governments and a profit-making paradise for private investors.

Corrupted urbanism is the worst possible version of the 60s British concept of "non-planning". Here, the withdrawal of the state doesn't mean organic development, dynamic growth, and inhabitants' empowerment; it means imposition of irrational market rules and laissez-faire ideology. In the "Wild, Wild Side", country-siders are compelled to accept the new deal without questioning its moral foundations. Their survival in the profit-making regime depends on how fast they can adapt and how fast they can embrace the consumerist dogma. The choice becomes simple: should I stay in a wedged village with no road, no running water and no economic prospect, or should I move to the booming town where I will have a chance, like millions of others before me, to access modern facilities and double my income? Should I upkeep my decaying house or should I rebuild a modern brick box with clean and shiny white tiles on the facades? Why resist? Resist what? What for? I want newness, I want progress, I want change!

De-side

On the progressive side

The sterile concept of modernity that has been brought along with development is imposing a vicious model of control, standardization and mercantilism. To make things worse, the romantic

urban-rural dispute is clumsily amalgamated with the tradition-modernity conflict. On the one hand, the cultural *tabula rasa* occurring in the city and the brutal importation of what has been agreed to be Western models, epitomize the drama of globalization; on the other the countryside, although crippled by critical issues, is promoted by the architectural intelligentsia as the sole protector of Chinese cultural exception. That said, nostalgic traditionalism, alongside regionalism and rampant cultural nationalism, might altogether deny the right of people to change. Uncompromising positivity toward both modernization and local traditions is essential. Country-siders strive for what the people in the city have: a progressive environment. I certainly don't think it is the architect's role to try to convince them of the contrary.

The "ugly truth" about the countryside is that it didn't wait for the architects. Critics say that recent development has brought more of the worst than the best. Although being a defensible assessment, it negates altogether the incredible effort of millions of persons, and the understanding that change is, intrinsically, a good thing. Vernacular architecture hasn't stopped evolving and reinventing itself because architects and historians haven't given their approval. Furthermore, official ambitions and market stratagems only have a limited stranglehold on the somehow chaotic free will of the country-siders. Despite the best efforts of scientific planning, rural space is tremendously diversified: it is skipping codes and transgressing any type of fixed definitions of urban, rural, traditional, or contemporary. Even notions such as Chineseness, authenticity or, its reverse, fakeness, are transcended. Pink and blue peasants' castles enthusiastically combine Greek columns, Gothic windows, Italian roof tiles and Eiffel tower-like antennas in Zhejiang; box-like two or three story family towers cantilever here and there to maximize space with minimum effort in Guangdong; all over China, white-tiled facades lining up on the road show their best faces to the passer-by; micro-entrepreneurs acrobatically add up floors on their homes in order to open a ten-square-meter sweatshop on the ground floor... Against all odds, country-siders are on the move!



On the move!
Emerging new countryside architecture,

The difference in legal, spatial and social status between urban and rural areas in China is an opportunity for individual and collective actions. Urbanites are immersed into a kind of amorphous mass. Unfortunately, they have little say about their living space; they need to adapt to the city, the city won't adapt to them. People in the countryside, on the other hand, own their land and have the chance to voice their opinions in a very direct way. They are active participant in the environment they've been shaping with their hands for centuries; they are their own developers. Hence, the countryside is a space of exception. Exceptions to the rules, exceptions to the norm, chaotic and informal entrepreneurship, hands-on approach, sometimes irrational, sometimes down to earth decision making, individual and collective action, and a seemingly lack of control -that is to say, a certain degree of freedom- all contribute to the potential for radical alternatives.

The reconstruction of China's countryside is a difficult challenge, but more importantly, it is also a fabulous opportunity to

keep reinventing urbanism, infrastructural planning, and architecture. The urgency of the situation calls for the urgency of creativity and commitment. Critical thinking, debates and actions on the “side” are needed more than ever. Architects shouldn’t be the *gardes-fou*, the protector of a vague and chosen tradition, nor should they be blind believers in newness. Architecture is here at its fullest potential. It is here neither to serve the markets ambitions nor simply to solve problems: it is here to help create the conditions for social progress. Only by trespassing the imaginary line we ourselves ordained between rural and urban, modernity and tradition, could we participate in the emergence of a radical new architecture.

Benjamin Beller_ Beijing 2012



On the progressive Side

BaO architects, MegaCun - Hyper dense megablock urbanism applied to rural development - Collage on a propaganda poster for Dazhai, the agricultural model commune of the 60s