Territory, Settlement, Household

A Project of Rural China

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Abstract

The thesis recognises the countryside as a specific social, cultural and political construct rather than as ancillary to the city. It challenges current strategies of rural regeneration in China, which heavily rely on models of urbanisation, as well as the prevailing mentality that views the countryside as not just economically but also culturally and intellectually under-developed. The key research question is thus: what does being rural mean socio-spatially?

Structured by three main studies of the rural-urban relationship, the cross-scalar framework and research by design, the thesis explores 'rurality' as a spatial question at the levels of territory, settlement and household. In the studies, the case study method, fieldwork and drawing play essential roles.

Based on the understanding of rurality as an elastic form of association in both social and spatial terms and across scales, the thesis advocates a shift in design thinking for the rural and proposes the integration of planning, urban design and architecture, in order to create one synthetic design discipline capable of facilitating an alternative multi-scalar rural regeneration model. The aim of this discipline is to create opportunities of change in the recognised and established field of power and is in this sense political. Furthermore, the thesis calls for integrating the spatial, social and cultural history and the transformations of rural China into a larger economic and political debate in order to transcend the conceptual limitations of the current rural discourse and to rethink rural development as a socio-cultural process.

Given that a self-organised support system underpinned by associational relationships in rural society embodies a rooted cultural unity in China, the thesis argues that rurality, or an elastic form of association, transcends the simple divide between urban and rural development by providing a distinct form of living arrangement and social organisation. In this sense, rurality is ultimately about how people organise themselves and associate with others.
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In the thesis framework diagram, nodes created on the intersections between the scale-frame and the time-frame are anchor points, and each chapter is organised to draw structural links between them. In other words, these anchor points are like pebbles dropped into water and the thesis chapters reflect how the ripples from these pebbles interact. The thesis is in this sense an operative framework.
Introduction
Context: China’s Urbanisation and Its Turning Points

In 1947, in the first line of his seminal work *From the Soil*, the founding father of sociology in China Fei Xiaotong wrote: ‘Chinese society is fundamentally rural.’ Seven decades later, both the state and the people are delighted by the belief that China has entered an urban era and put its rural past behind it. What has happened?

After the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949 and throughout the implementation of the nationwide planned economy that occurred from the 1950s to the 1970s, industrialisation in cities relied on surplus agricultural production from the vast countryside. This period can be seen as the pre-urbanisation phase. A major turning point occurred in 1978, the beginning of the so-called economic reforms. Deng Xiaoping, the ‘chief engineer’ of China’s fundamental shift towards a market economy, explained this transformation in plain language: ‘Let some people get rich first.’ The sharp surge in China’s urban population, from 17.9% in 1978 to 54.4% in 2014, reveals the unprecedented speed and scale of China’s urbanisation over the past four decades. In comparison, the same process took Europe almost a century to accomplish. The alliance between market-oriented urbanisation and state power, with the state ownership of urban land, a legacy of the planned economy, allowed local governments to lease the land use right to private developers, underpins rapid urban expansion through the mega-plot model, as illustrated by Shenzhen’s transformation from a fishing village into a metropolis in just 15 years. Meanwhile, the sustainability of urban sprawl, the affordability of urban life and social inequality and instability are becoming increasingly pressing issues. This is exemplified by the rise of the floating population of 245 million, driven by strategic relaxations of the *hukou* (household registration) system. These relaxations allow rural migrant workers to be temporarily employed in urban areas yet provide them with limited rights to home ownership, employment and public services in cities. Therefore, following economic reform, the countryside now plays two related key roles: it supplies a mobile labour force to the frontline of urbanisation, cities, and provides home communities for rural migrant workers to return to upon retirement or during crises in the labour market. China survived the global financial crisis that began in 2008 by employing its countryside as a stabiliser, and through a nationwide urbanisation initiative that led to the construction of large-scale housing and infrastructure projects. Drawing a correlation between urbanisation and capitalism, David Harvey argues that cities have been built and rebuilt to achieve capital accumulation, and capital is committed to endlessly expanding its range and reach in order to survive. However, expansion can never truly be endless.

In 2011, China’s urban population exceeded half of its total population for the first time in history. Meanwhile, economic growth has slowed, and economists are increasingly raising concerns that China’s property bubble is about to burst. As the evidence mounts, the suggestion that major cities in China have reached their limits in terms of growth has become a political issue and is now acknowledged by policymakers. Urbanisation in China has reached another turning point. With the amount of construction in cities declining, China’s vast and relatively empty countryside is becoming the new frontline of urbanisation. This is made explicit by the national programme that began in the mid-2000s: Building a New Socialist Countryside.

2. Deng first put forward the far-reaching idea during the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee Work Conference in December 1978. Deng later reaffirmed it on various and many occasions.
4. The urban population in Europe increased from 17% in 1951 to 54% in 2011.
5. The mega-plot model refers to a form of parcelisation of land serviced by large-scale streets, which is both fast and financially economically driven.
6. According to the National Report on the Floating Population in China 2014, by the end of 2013 the floating population had reached 245 million and is estimated to exceed 350 million by 2050. This report is the official document written specifically to address the issue of the floating population and is published annually by the National Health and Family Planning Commission of the PRC.
7. The countryside as a stabiliser of China’s urbanisation is argued by sociologist He Xuefeng. See Xuefeng He, ‘建立乡村与建设城市’ [Building countryside to build cities], *Zhongguo Daolu [Chinese Road of Urbanisation]* (Beijing: China Renmin Chubanshe, 2016), 101–108.
8. Given that China’s market predominately relies upon manufacturing and exports to foreign countries, especially the U.S., economists predicted that China would lose thirty million jobs from the export sector as a result of the 2009 global financial crisis. However, according to a report released by the Chinese government, the country saw only three million jobs lost from the export sector by the end of 2009 due to the boom in the construction industry and the surge in infrastructure investment. This should not be surprising. The global history of urbanisation includes Haussmann’s renovation of Paris from the 1850s to the 1870s and the suburbanisation of the U.S. after World War II, both of which used urbanisation as the primary means to regulate the national economy, through the former via the form of rebuilding and the latter expansion.
Photographer Tim Franco’s shocking images capture the transformation of Chongqing’s suburban areas from 2009 to 2013. Franco’s work draws attention to China’s secondary developing cities, such as Chongqing, Chengdu and Wuhan, revealing that stories of over-scaled urbanisation are not just confined to ‘star cities’ in the coastal region such as Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen. Away from the spotlight, these inland metropolises have quietly seen housing complexes turn into fields and highways cut across villages, while farmers continue to grow vegetables on the site of construction sites and sheep graze between highways.

Source: Metamorpolis by Tim Franco
Research Question

The Chinese countryside is in a state of crisis now more than ever. Through a centralised planning regime and the on-going *hukou* reform, the Chinese state is extending the hierarchical urban structure from the province down through cities, counties and towns to every single village. New village settlements are being built based on the urban *xiaoqu* (small district) model. Urban nuclear family flats are being employed as the template to reconstruct rural dwellings. Ultimately, through the practice of everyday life, rural populations are being trained and transformed into urban citizens. This agenda is signalled by terms frequently used in government reports as well as by the state news agency: ‘people-centred urbanisation’ and the ‘urbanisation of people’. The rural is largely considered not just economically but also culturally and intellectually under-developed. This mentality is widely shared among policymakers, design professionals and rural populations themselves. When confronted by issues of rural regeneration, urbanisation, not only of the space but also of the people, is seen as the obvious solution and is thus unquestioned. Prevailing urbanisation strategies and mentalities are, consciously or unconsciously, regenerating the countryside by destroying it: erasing the spatial formations of the rural territory, settlement and family house and consequently eliminating the socio-cultural mechanisms that underpin them. In this context, the recognition of the countryside as a specific social, cultural and political construct, rather than as ancillary to the city, is the foundation of this thesis. This invites the following key question:

What does being rural mean socio-spatially? Or, how to understand rurality as a spatial question?

Research Framework

To develop these questions, the thesis is structured by three main studies: the rural-urban relationship, the cross-scalar framework and research by design.

The rural-urban relationship is, on the one hand, a subject of study of the thesis and, on the other, a framing perspective for the research. This means that the exploration of the meaning and means of living and being rural in China is conducted through comparisons with the urban in order to draw out the differences between them. To compare does not mean the characterisation of the rural relies on that of the urban, but is rather meant to distinguish it. Nor does this approach intend to glorify or moralise about the rural. It acknowledges that the rural is different and seeks to clarify in what ways it is different and to thus liberate the rural regeneration from the urban myth. A spatial interpretation of rurality is sought at three levels: territory, settlement and household. This three-level structure is a direct reflection of the conventional divisions in design based on spatial scales, namely, planning, urban design and architecture. However, more importantly, beyond the spatial division, this structure adopts Pierre Bourdieu’s three-level approach as a methodological framework, which he outlined in a conversation with Loïc J. D. Wacquant in the following terms:

First, analyse the position of the field vis-à-vis the field of power […]
Second, map out the objective structure of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents or institutions who compete for the legitimate form of specific authority of which this field is the site;
Third, analyse the habitus of agents, the different systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalising a determinate type of social and economic condition, and which find in a definite trajectory within the field under consideration a more or less favourable opportunity to become actualised.

Interpreting this approach in the context of the thesis, the first level is about how rural society is positioned in relation to other fields, most importantly, the urban field, and within the recognised and established field of power. For Bourdieu, the field of power is the field that all others are situated within and normally subordinated to, that is, a combination of the field of economy and the field of politics. Therefore, in the context of the thesis, I primarily refer to the field of power as the one defined and dominated by the Chinese state. Hence, in spatial terms, the first level focuses on the structure of territory.
and planning. The second level is concerned with formal and informal social organisation and the spatial composition of the field or the site, that is to say, the village community and its settlement. The last level directly engages with individual agents and how they operate within the field. For the thesis, this means rural families and their household management and everyday life in relation to domestic space. In this regard, Bourdieu’s framework provides a way to dissect the socio-spatial mechanisms of rural China, through which a comprehensive enquiry is broken down into independent and operative contexts of study.

As summarised by Helena Webster, a simplified understanding of this three-level approach can be described as ‘individual action, the immediate context within which individuals operate, and the position of this context within social space’. This brief interpretation reverses the order of the three-level approach, perhaps in order to make it fit the operating logic of the architects that Webster is addressing. However, a potential misconception of the role of individual action may result from Webster’s summary. It is important to note that, in a Bourdieusian way, individual action, or individual subjectivity, is not sufficient on its own and must be examined in relation to the objective constraints of the field, both of which together produce cultural and social practices. In this regard, a better way to frame a reversed interpretation for the first two levels is individual reaction, then action and then the reproduction, as well as potential alteration, of the field through acting within it. In fact, this brings out the essential character of Bourdieu’s methodological framework: an attempt to reconcile dualisms in social sciences, such as structure versus agency, determinism versus freedom and micro versus macro. Therefore, the complex interplay between these independent and operative contexts of study is the ultimate subject of study. In this regard, Bourdieu’s three-level approach provides an effective tool for the thesis to construct a cross-scalar spatial understanding of rurality. Returning to the spatial division in design disciplines, this approach is itself a critique of the current situation in China where planning, urban design and architecture are largely separated. The entire thesis should be thus understood as a synthesising project for rural China.

Within this framework, a design is put forward at each scale. The design project challenges the current predominantly urban-biased strategies for rural generation in order to offer alternatives. This approach is essential for the thesis to address rurality as a spatial question by problematising historical and contemporary rural transformations, instrumentalising the socio-spatial diagrams found in China’s rural society, and then (re)constructing a spatial definition of rurality from within. To put it differently, the production of knowledge and formal production are inseparable and methodologically linked. In this regard, the design project should be seen not as a solution to all the questions discussed, but rather as a contribution to the research framed by questions of design, hence research by design.

In parallel to the written thesis, a continuous scroll is developed illustrating the journey from an urban centre to a proposed rural housing unit across different scales. This scroll integrates all three threads of the rural-urban relationship, cross-scalar framework and research by design, and thus represents one possible synthesis of the thesis.

Chapter Outlines

The thesis consists of three chapters, aligned with the three scales of territory, settlement and household. The internal organisation of each chapter is based on a common framework: Firstly, a historical context that focuses on China before modernisation and the collectivisation era before the economic reforms of the 1980s; secondly, an examination of socio-spatial changes in contemporary rural China; thirdly, a close reading of the prevailing strategies of rural regeneration promoted by the state through both proposals and realised cases; and lastly, responding to the three aforementioned moments of transformation, a design project that consists of principle strategies and contextualised scenarios.

Chapter 1. A Territorial Logic begins with an examination of the historical concept of the Chinese territory by looking at the standard market community in traditional China and people’s commune planning proposals from the Maoist
era. This is followed by a remapping of China’s contemporary hierarchical territory that encompasses both rural and urban areas, including related discussions of the rural-urban relationships, floating population and jianxiao reform. Then, rural planning, the key instrument of the Building a New Socialist Countryside programme, is discussed in relation to Urban System Planning and with the aid of planning proposals where the state’s Three Concentrations strategy is employed as a guiding principle. To conclude, the project of territory questions received ideas of hierarchy and concentration by looking at the entire territory as the subject of design and advancing a type of elastic, self-organised territorial unit on the scale of a rural town.

In Chapter 2, The Village Settlement, the people’s commune settlement and traditional kindred village are compared in terms of their urban plan, service provision, daily routine and social relationships to draw out moments of radical shifts as well as continuations and to understand the agency of spatial design in shaping rural communities. This chapter then discusses the contemporary ‘inner-decaying village’ and adopts the concept of the ‘cultural nexus of power’ as an entry point to dissect the nature of a village community, followed by a close reading of the urban xiang model, a template promoted by the government to reconstruct the village communities and their spatial form. Based on these discussions, the project of framing rethink the socio-spatial infrastructure of a village settlement by interpreting a model of social learning in the rural context and emphasising the associational relationships between spatial elements and households.

Chapter 3, The Dissolved Household provides a close reading of three historical rural dwelling models, the traditional Chinese courtyard house, the jialou (earthen building) and the people’s commune housing, in order to construct a socio-spatial diagram that reveals the relationship between domestic space and family relations and from which the three-jian principle is extracted. In relation to the contemporary rural household, this chapter identifies a fundamental change in the idea of family and domesticity resulting from the missing middle generation in rural families and terms this phenomenon the ‘dissolved household’. The dissolved household signals an emerging rural social structure that is fundamentally different from the nuclear family norm. However, on the government side, the urban nuclear family flat is widely applied in proposals for model villages to reshape rural domestic space as well as the subjectivity of its inhabitants. The project of jian instrumentalises the interplay between the dissolved household and the idea of jian, an in-between state in space and time, and thus puts forward an alternative form of living for rural families.

Research Methods

The case study method is central to the thesis. As defined by Wilbur Schramm, the case study is a tool to explore decisions: ‘why they were taken, how they were implemented and with what results’.18 This method hinges on the idea that generalisable knowledge can be extracted from selected typical cases and thus transferred or applied to other cases. In this regard, the case study method in architecture is essentially typological. In the thesis, case studies are taken as a form of enquiry into spatial design in relation to social practices, cultural production, governance and economic organisation. This enquiry is firstly conducted through drawing and redrawing spatial plans and maps, as by extraction and transformation diagrammatic architectural and urban drawings are able to convey and produce knowledge for design. Therefore, in the thesis, drawing is utilised as an essential tool of research by design, which is able to demonstrate rigour, analytical coherence and speculative potential.19

It is also important to mention the role of fieldwork in the thesis. During the research process I have come to realise that contemporary case studies of ordinary self-built rural family houses are rarely documented and original material on China’s people’s communes is largely inaccessible as this legacy of the collectivisation era is still considered politically sensitive by the current regime. Therefore, I have undertaken extensive fieldwork in China to gather first-hand material by taking measurements of buildings, producing survey drawings and conducting interviews with residents and local leaders. This fieldwork includes, for example, case studies of contemporary rural family houses and household management, discussed in Chapter 3, as well as the case study of the realised commune settlement in Shigushan village, including its design intention, housing distribution policy and implementation and its lasting impact on villagers’ lives. The fieldwork has gradually built up an empathic apprehension of the practices and routines of rural households through semi-structured interviews and intimate personal experiences and participation instead of pure observation, as well as an empirical understanding of the rural-urban relationship and territorial organisation of the Wuhan metropolitan area.20 Thus, apart from collecting information, fieldwork provides

18 Wilbur Schramm, Notes on Case Studies of Instructional Media Project (December 1971), 8.
20 Wuhan is the capital city of Hubei province in the central region of China. Wuhan is selected as the main context of the research. This choice is explained in detail in Chapter 1, section 2, where contemporary territorial organisation is unpacked.
a concrete point of entry into the subject of study.\textsuperscript{21} For example, the concept of the dissolved household and the ripple effect of the domestic realm are largely informed by my direct observation of the everyday life of rural households and the daily practice of household management.\textsuperscript{22} Consequently, design ethnography, a method that focuses on gathering information which can be acted upon,\textsuperscript{23} plays an important role in shaping the design project, especially at the household level.

Ultimately, my dozens of trips from central Wuhan through suburban districts and industrial zones to the rural Fenghuang town and the Shigushan village were translated into a drawn scroll, a visual thesis to an extent. This scroll intends to instrumentalise the continuity in traditional Chinese scroll painting, a feature that has historically structured visual aesthetics and perceptions of architecture in China and which cannot be simply defined as representational but rather speaks to a deeply-rooted socio-psychological demand in Chinese culture.\textsuperscript{24} In the thesis, the continuous scroll blends and condenses into a single drawing the urban and rural spheres, existing and proposed spatial constructs and people’s lifestyles, behaviours and mentalities, that is, the social reality that these spaces have produced and may produce. In this way, by further constructing moments of continuation, transformation, contradiction and disruption in the drawing, the scroll intensifies the confrontation between various threads developed in the written thesis and is thus a critical method of communication and provocation.

\textsuperscript{21} This fieldwork-based approach is also inspired by Bourdieu's method, where fieldwork plays an essential role especially regarding his effort to establish the connection between theory and empirical evidence. For example, while conducting his research on the Kabyle house in Algeria, Bourdieu took more than 1,200 photos of the Kabyle people going about their daily lives. I see this type of visual documentation as a recognition of the agency of the subjects, even though his fieldwork method at the time was still largely influenced by the structural anthropology approach developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his later work, Outline of a Theory of Practice, Bourdieu heavily referenced his fieldwork in Algeria, based on which he gradually departed from his earlier structuralist method. See Pierre Bourdieu, Algeria 1960: Essays by Pierre Bourdieu, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice (Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, 16), trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

\textsuperscript{22} For a discussion, see Chapter 3, section 2.

\textsuperscript{23} Fabian Segalstam and Stefan Holmlid, “Ethnography by Design: On Goals and Mediating Artefacts,” Arts and Humaneities in Higher Education 14, no. 2 (1 December 2014): 135.

\textsuperscript{24} Doreen Bernath, “The Intrusive Rendering: Dictation of Stereotypes and the Extra-Ordinary,” Taiwan in Comparative Perspective 1 (November 2003), 37-49.

\textbf{How the Thesis is Situated in the Field of Architecture and Beyond}

Patrik Schumacher stated in full confidence that ‘architecture is an inherently urban discipline’ in his article entitled Don’t Waste Your Time in the Countryside published in Architectural Design in 2016.\textsuperscript{25} Schumacher further indicated that intellectual investment in architectural possibilities in the rural would constitute a divergence of the architectural discipline from ‘social and economic realities and societal valuations’, and would result in architecture ‘losing credibility and missing its societal function’.\textsuperscript{26} In other words, there is no need, no value and no future for architecture in the rural. Perhaps Schumacher is an extreme case, but his strident statement nevertheless represents the urban-biased discourse of contemporary architecture. It would not be going too far to say that the Modern Movement was largely aligned with the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, and thus has its roots in urbanity. Furthermore, as pointed out by Cole Roskam, architects are often ill-equipped to address scales, systems and relationships in the rural context due to its ambiguity in both social and spatial organisation and the relations between them, and consequently the difficulties in seeking commonality and consistency in rural spatial practices.\textsuperscript{27} However, the difficulties identified by Roskam actually result from the mindset and skillset of the majority of architects who are shaped by and developed for the city. Therefore, before architecture in the rural can be discussed without bias, there are at least two types of questions to tackle: Why rural? How rural?

On the one hand, questions that begin with ‘why’ require an enquiry into meanings and thus knowledge and methods from the social sciences, especially sociology and anthropology in the case of this thesis. Regarding rurality in China, in the 1940s, Fei Xiaotong conceptualised that Chinese rural society was in essence ‘a society of acquaintances’.\textsuperscript{28} This concept is not only still visible and real today but is of urgent relevance given the heavily urban-biased strategies of regeneration now being implemented in the countryside. While Fei’s argument is based on generalised observations across various territorial and societal levels, Prasenjit Duara’s theoretical cultural nexus of power provides a more focused lens through which the mechanism of a village community can be analysed.\textsuperscript{29} When Fei’s work was


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 132.


\textsuperscript{29} Prasenjit Duara, Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942 (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1989).
revisited by He Xuefeng in *Non - From the Soil* in the context of the collapse of rural society following China's shift towards a market economy. He described the current climate as 'the atomisation of villages', revealing the contemporary factors that are destructive to the social formation of China's rural society. Some sociologists and anthropologists take a more direct spatial approach when examining China's rural society. For example, William Skinner dissects the organisation of traditional Chinese rural territory through the lens of the standard market community, and in the context of contemporary China, David Bray establishes a link between China's new rural planning policies and changes in everyday life.

Outside the Chinese context, apart from Pierre Bourdieu's framework, the thesis also adopts the concept of strategy versus tactics developed by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* to understand how actions taken by the user, in this instance rural residents, respond to situations produced and governed by strategies imposed by the producer, who is within the power structure and is in this case the government and real estate developer. These works lay the foundation for the thesis to develop an in-depth understanding of what has shaped and is shaping the socio-spatial organisation of past and present rural society in China.

On the other hand, questions that begin with 'how' are a direct investigation into the spatial. In architectural history, compared with the tremendously rich material on traditional Chinese architecture, rural architecture of the collectivisation era, specifically, the people’s commune, has received far less attention. As mentioned, critical analyses on this matter in mainland China are still relatively restricted. Nevertheless, Ronald G. Knapp and Shen Dongqi draw a general picture of the five stages of China's rural transformation during the four decades after 1949, and Lu Duanfang examines the ideology and planning of the people’s commune against the backdrop of architectural modernism as part of a historiographical account of contemporary Chinese urban form and its history. In addition, China's authoritative *Architectural Journal*, run by the Architectural Society of China, published a series of commune proposals as model examples from 1958-1964. In addition to the survey material collected during fieldwork, these materials serve as primary resources for the thesis to examine the people's commune. In terms of more recent transformations in rural China, John Friedmann identifies continuities in rural development models, especially township and village enterprises, despite major shifts in social and political organisations following the economic reforms. As indicated by this brief account, what is missing from existing research works is a synthesised reading focused on spatial questions of rural China that links historical transformations and on-going rural regeneration.

On the side of practice, the Rural Urban Framework established by Joshua Bolchover and John Lin divides recent village developments into five categories, urban, factory, suburban, contested and rural, and applies this categorisation as a framework to discuss case studies and completed and un-built projects. It is a notable effort to create a dialogue between research and design on the Chinese countryside. However, the Rural Urban Framework is primarily project-based and lacks generalisable knowledge for design. In contrast, the thesis aims to develop systemic design thinking on socio-spatial issues in rural China, primarily as a provocation rather than solution.

By building upon works from architecture, sociology and anthropology, and by exploring questions of why and how, the thesis aims to construct an operative tool that provides a multi-disciplinary and cross-scalar framework for academics, practitioners and stakeholders, for instance, local governments and developers as well as rural residents, to rethink the practice of architecture, urban design and planning in the context of socio-spatial development in rural China. In parallel, through this rethinking of design disciplines, the thesis seeks to unsettle existing socio-economic realities and values that are primarily based on and devised for an urban world, and to further offer the rural a socio-spatial interpretation based on its own spatial characteristics, its own socio-economic mechanisms and its own cultural constructs. The thesis is thus a project of and for rural China.
A Territorial Logic
Planning the Rural
This chapter is an enquiry into how China’s rural territory is organised. To understand the current territorial structure of rural China, it is necessary to understand its formation during the country’s Maoist-era nationwide collectivisation when the people’s commune system was implemented to radically restructure the rural territory. To understand the planning of the people’s commune, its socio-spatial disruptions as well as how it continued earlier traditions, this enquiry needs to look back at the traditional market system of Imperial China.

American sinologist Frederick W. Mote stated that ‘the idea that the city represents either a distinct style or, more important, a higher level of civilization than the countryside is a cliché of our Western cultural traditions’, and that this very idea does not apply to traditional China. Based on spatial forms of cities and architecture, dressing styles, elite psychology and cultural and economic activities as well as the rights and access to geographical and social mobility attained by the populations in traditional China, Mote put forward the idea of ‘an urban-rural continuum’ both in spatial organisation and Chinese psychology.  


2. Ibid, 101-119. Specifically, in terms of the physical and organisational aspects of traditional Chinese cities, as elaborated upon by Mote, the city wall did exist yet was not perceived as a definite boundary by the large numbers of people involved in the frequent movements between urban and rural areas. Furthermore, the building styles and layout appeared uniform across urban and rural areas.
comparing to medieval European cities described by Ludwig Hilberseimer in *The Nature of Cities* (1955), Mote clarified that Chinese cities had no civic monuments, no citizens, no corporate identity and no distinct form of government. Instead, the traditional Chinese cities shared a fundamental character with rural components despite their differences, and the rural components extending to every corner of Chinese civilisation defined the Chinese way of life. Following Mote, a question arises—How did these rural components organise the traditional Chinese territory and a way of life?

Based on a study of traditional and pre-Communist China before 1949, anthropologist G. William Skinner, a proponent of a spatial approach through the lens of anthropology, advanced the notion of a ‘standard market community’, with social relationships formed within the family and village extended into the larger market area and beyond. Skinner argued that it was this standard market area rather than a single village that constituted the realm of everyday production, living and social exchange in rural society. Thus, the standard market community can be seen as the territorial unit of traditional China.

Having no physical boundary, the standard market community was a relatively stable but not rigid unit. Given the nature of agricultural economy, land is the most important means of production and essential for gaining autonomy of production and living. Power largely hinges on the holding of land, and the organisation of labour and services is strongly related to land distribution. Therefore, in an agrarian society, human settlements are relatively evenly distributed in order to efficiently access and control farmland. A typical standard market community consisted of around 18 natural villages in an area of 50 km², accommodating roughly 1,500 households. The centre of a standard market area was a market town that facilitated the exchange of goods, provided basic services including financial services. The spatial and social territory of the market town was defined by the level of transportation—by the distance one could travel within half a day at the time. All sorts of service

3. Ibid, 114.
4. Ibid, 105.
7. According to Skinner, a standard market town was normally not walled, while an intermediate market town was partially walled and a central market town was walled.
providers, such as tailors, medical practitioners, casual labourer and even marriage brokers commuted and worked within this area. Roads extending from the market town were not just logistic connections but also the manifestation of how power extended from the market town across the territory. Thus, both the idea and spatial organisation of a market community are territorial. It cannot be understood through the market town itself, but also has to consider the movement and circulation between villages and the market town, as well as the periodicity of economic, social and cultural activities, for example, the market schedules. The power and authority that governed a standard market community was synthetically produced by the reciprocity and tensions between local clan authorities and the power attained through economic management – the control of the market itself through various merchant associations. Another issue of equal importance was the organisation of local temples and religious services. Regular festivals were the moments when a sense of local community was reinforced, for example through shared activities such as marching the territorial extent of a standard market community. Therefore, as argued by Skinner, the standard market community was not only the basic unit of social organisation but also a culture-bearing unit.

At the regional level, the standard market community worked within a larger three-level market system of central, intermediate and standard market towns. Links between market towns at different levels were created by the movement of goods and mobile merchants. It is important to note that a standard market community was rarely only engaged in one single intermediate market system, but participated in several intermediate systems following market schedules. Similarly, an intermediate market system was connected to several central market towns. In this way, the market system was formed by interlocking networks.

Skinner’s regional analysis is a critique of the over-simplified understanding of socio-spatial relations in the territorial organisation of traditional China – the three sets of correlation: 1. centralised bureaucratic organisations and major cities; 2. gentry governance and market town; 3. patriarchal clan system and rural villages. Skinner rejected this reading by arguing that the true mechanism, on the contrary, was ‘the contrastive structure of administrative and commercial hinterlands and their very imperfect alignment’. In terms of territorial organisation, the administrative system was organised in a
discrete manner where each unit only belonged to a unit at the next higher level, while the market system was systematically overlapped. The three-level market system was not only to accommodate economic activities but also to condition political and social structures. In this regard, in traditional China, the bureaucratic government was intertwined with informal organisation and social management at the local level. Both bureaucratic resources and controls were limited at market systems below the level of a central market. The organisation of standard and intermediate market systems was managed and controlled by neither peasantry nor state power, but by local elites and the gentry class. To an extent, the relationship between standard and intermediate market systems, as well as relationships within each system, represented the relationship between classes. Interclass social integration through the market system paralleled and, as argued by Skinner, even surpassed that of the administrative system. Therefore, the various overlapping social organisations formed the rural governance and underpinned the viability of civil society. In spatial terms, the territorial power in traditional China did not find its organisational core in major cities but in the interlocking networks of market towns and villages. Evolving over two-thousand years with agrarian society, the market community matured as a loose socio-spatial unit built upon kinship, markets and religion embedded in a cluster of a market town and a number of villages, and became the territorial organisation of traditional China. It synthesised at a territorial scale the collective interests of local clans and gentry, provided economic management and control and promoted religious and cultural bodies. With the community as much defined by shared economic interests as by cultural events that shaped collective social identity, it fostered strong associational relationships. The three-level market system of central, intermediate and standard market towns created therefore interlocking economic and social networks, which, largely controlled by local elites, constituted the territorial governance. In China’s later modernisation, this three-level structure provided a crucial foundation for the Communist state to regulate rural society and territory through the people’s commune system. After 1949, primary tasks of the newly-established socialist Chinese state were to reshape the lives of Chinese people and to transform every inch of both rural and urban territories. With guidance by the Soviet Union, the Chinese state carried out a land reform that abolished the private land ownership and consequently initiated collectivised urban industries and agricultural rural production. Soon implemented throughout the entire country, the danwei (work unit) system for the city, an all-inclusive urban unit that assigned living, working and welfare provisions to the urban population, and the people’s commune system for the countryside established their dominance in both production and government. The 1958 statement of Mao Zedong, the founding father of People’s Republic of China, is perhaps the best manifesto for the people’s commune:

We should gradually integrate industry, agriculture, trade, education and the military into a people’s commune, constituting the basic unit of our society.*

In this light, the main task at a territorial level, was to regulate and integrate rural populations and scattered natural villages through an all-inclusive modular territorial unit: the people’s commune.

The scale of operation is astonishing. By 1958, 120 million rural households (nearly 500 million people)* had been integrated into 26,000 people’s communes. This went far beyond simply implementing a new administrative system. Rather, it aimed at a nationwide transformation of traditional spatial patterns in rural China. The proposal for the Hongqi People’s Commune exemplifies the state’s attempt to scale up the basic unit of rural society. This proposal provided a schematic regional plan for the entire Qingpu County, consisting of 18 towns each with an average population of 15-20,000.* (Page 18)

The scale of this regional plan (with 14 people’s communes proposed) manifests the state’s ambition to undertake a complete makeover of the territorial system. This required the relocation of natural villages. As part of the regional plan, Zhujiajiao Town, the biggest town in the county, was to be transformed into the Hongqi People’s Commune. In the proposal, more than 120 villages, mapped

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* Although, according to the analysis by Yamane on Shangtung market town, registrations and licenses were required by provincial governments for the operation of central and intermediate market towns.

10 This quote is translated by the author from the original Chinese text: “我们的方向,应该逐步地、有次序地把工(工作)、农(农业)、商(交换)、学(文化教育)、兵(民兵,即全民武装)组成一个大公社,从而构成为我国社会的基本单位。”

11 According to the first nationwide population census published by the National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China, in the 1950s China had a rural population of 555 million, which made up 87 per cent of the country’s entire population.


13 Qingpu County was a rural area that fell under the jurisdiction of Shanghai at the time.

14 Dehua Li and others, “Qingpuqu de Hongqi Renmin Gonghe Guhua” (In Qingpu County, the Hongqi People’s Commune) Architettura e Giardini (Planning for Qingpu County and Hongqi People’s Commune), Architettura e Giardini, (October 1958), 2-6.
Proposed central settlement
Settlement based on an existing site
Industry Site
Electric power plant
Fishery

0.2km Existing village (> 50 residents)
Existing village (< 50 residents)

1.5-kilometre radius circle

Fig. 06. Proposed Masterplan for Qingpu County
Consisting of 14 People’s Communes
Source: Architectural Journal (October 1958), article by Dehua Li and others; Redrawn and annotated by the author

Fig. 07. Existing Masterplan of Zhujiajiao Town, 1950s
vs. Proposed Masterplan for Hongqi People’s Commune (Zhujiajiao Town)
Source: Architectural Journal (October 1958), article by Dehua Li and others; Redrawn and annotated by the author
in the original masterplan of Zhujiajiao Town, were to be integrated into 10 concentrated settlements and roads between residential areas and farmlands were to be reconfigured accordingly.\(^{15}\) The organisational structure of the new masterplan was determined by 10 evenly distributed circles with a radius of 1.5 kilometres each.\(^{15}\) Each settlement was located in the centre of a circle and was to accommodate a similar number of residents. Two considerations were stressed in the proposal: 1) the 1.5-kilometre radius guaranteed that farmers would spend no more than 15 minutes walking to their farmlands; 2) a unit population of 1,500-2,000 was ideal for the provision of shared services. This organisation thus sought to establish a balance between the efficiency of agricultural activities and the optimum population for sharing standardised public facilities. All of this reveals that the ultimate goal of restructuring the territory was to establish autonomous units that facilitate both production and living within a modular area.\(^{15}\)

Autonomy was explicitly demonstrated and underpinned by the ideology of self-reliance, the key ethos of the people's commune.\(^{16}\) On the one hand, the promotion of self-reliance was driven by the lack of resources affecting China at the time, with the state attempting to solve this crisis by fostering economic self-reliant units, the communes. It was through the communes that the agglomeration of labour force and other material resources of production was made possible. For example, arable land was accumulated for larger-scale agricultural activities. To an extent, economies of scale were achieved, which was evident in economic growth. On the other, stemming from the country's socialist regime, self-reliance meant that labour was not only seen as a means of production but also valued as the highest form of virtue. This idea was supported by a socialist ideal that all members should contribute equally to collective development and receive shared benefits accordingly. By living and working in a commune, farmers were trained to enact this idea and educated to acquire a political consciousness. Therefore, for the state, the commune was a fundamental instrument for the enactment of new socialist lifestyles and mentalities among the peasantry, which in the 1950s accounted for 87% of China's population.

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\(^{15}\) These circles were originally drawn on the masterplan, which makes this organisational structure clearly legible. The representational technique can also be found in the masterplan for the Satellite People's Commune, Suiping, Henan, also published in Architectural Journal.

\(^{16}\) This strategy represents a typical solution at the territorial level in commune proposals, though the unit population and the distance between residential areas and farmlands varied. For example, the proposal for the Qiyi People's Commune integrated 697 natural villages into 22 new settlements, where the farthest distance between residential areas and farmlands was set at 1 kilometre.
However, the autonomy in China’s commune system was not to be mistaken as the devolution of political power to these units. On the contrary, its three-level government system worked as an extension of the Communist Party structure. Through spatial planning, production, labour force, welfare provision and cultural and educational activities were managed in accordance with the government structure. For example, the proposed masterplan for the Qiyi People’s Commune presents a three-tier structure for its 22 settlements. Fig.09

A standard settlement was to accommodate several production teams, the bottom-level unit mainly for farming and typically numbering fewer than 200 people. Multi-functional canteens served the needs of public activities at this level. As these teams formed the next level unit – the production brigade (numbering roughly between 1,000 and 2,000 people) – the spatial formation of the Qiyi People’s Commune saw several standard settlements surrounding one intermediate settlement, where small industrial workshops, kindergartens and primary schools were organised. Then clusters like this had one central settlement that was to manage large-scale cultivation as well as some industrial production, and had the highest level of administration and public services, such as hospitals and secondary schools. Made up of brigades, each commune normally accommodated populations of between 10,000 and 80,000, roughly equivalent to a contemporary town. In this way, a hierarchical structure was spatialised within all aspects of life.\[17\] Given that more than 99 per cent of the peasantry participated in the commune system by 1958, this structure established a chain of command running from the top (the state) to the bottom (every production team), hereby attempting to completely replace the existing social organisation – the patriarchal clan system – with state institutions.

Mao’s initial vision for the commune system was to ruralise cities and to urbanise the countryside, reducing rural-urban differences. During the period of the Great Leap Forward (1958–61), agricultural development was given equal, if not greater, importance to industrial development. The Great Leap Forward

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18 Apart from a hierarchical structure, the Qiyi masterplan also presented a network idea of organisation. Differentiated roles of production were arranged based on natural conditions, for example, cotton farms were concentrated in the southeast and rice farms in the west. New settlements within this commune were expected to coordinate themselves in terms of production and living at the territorial level. This reveals that in the Qiyi masterplan, the autonomy of a people’s commune was devised at the level of the entire commune instead of individual production brigades.
19 Jianguo Yilai Zhongyang Wenxian Xuanbian [Selections of Important Documents After the Establishment of P. R. China] (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 1995), 598.
was indicative of the confidence by both the state and the people due to the economic success achieved during the commune movement. However, the Great Leap Forward soon demanded economic goals that overburdened the commune system. It led to the Great Famine and caused the death of millions in the countryside. Coinciding with the end of the Great Leap Forward, the commune system was largely reorganised in the 1960s and rural development stopped being at the centre of attention, replaced by a new concentration on urban growth. Eventually, the commune system was terminated during the economic reforms in the 1980s.

The commune system has been widely criticised by economists for its low productivity, lack of incentives and corrupt commune leadership. A more seemingly fundamental mainstream critique of the system, acknowledged by state news agencies, is that the ambition of the people’s commune, exemplified by the Great Leap Forward, exceeded the level of development of productive forces at the time. However, this type of blame neglects problems in the rural-urban relationship at the time – the strategy that prioritised urban industrialisation.

After reorganisation, with surplus production extracted from the countryside and relocated to cities, commune-based agriculture was soon paralysed by the burden of having to support danwei-based industrialisation. This was realised through a state monopoly over purchase and distribution, with communes forced to meet set quotas for agricultural production and compulsory sale to feed urban populations. A centrally planned distribution of basic foodstuffs to urban collectives became a new means of control. The planned purchase and distribution was further enhanced by the hukou (household registration) system established in the 1958, a vital state institution for the control of labour mobility and welfare distribution. By dividing Chinese citizens into rural and urban households, land use rights, opportunities for employment and access to education and healthcare are all determined based on this system. It was thus a sine qua non to reinforce the rural-urban dichotomy at the time. In order to implement these centrally planned systems, the power of state bureaucracy became even more dominant than it was during feudal eras. The rigid administrative hierarchy superimposed onto rural society was not only to manage the countryside, but also to fuel industrialisation in cities. As a result,
The administrative structure comparison between the 1970s and current status in Fenghuang People’s Commune. In terms of territorial organisation, it is clear that the three-level system of the commune government was built upon the old structure of the traditional market system. Essential to the management of population in both systems was the modular territorial unit that accommodated living and production. In this regard, the Chinese conception of territory is revealed as organised and governed through modular units built upon communities, or in other words, clearly defined by social ties. Nevertheless, what is fundamentally different is that the commune brought all layers of interlocking networks in traditional rural society into one single system. Therefore, as the all-encompassing socio-political, economic and spatial model, the people’s commune fundamentally restructured Chinese rural society and territory between the 1950s and 1970s.

Laying the foundation to today’s rural China, the impact of the people’s commune is still visible and real, regarding both the social realities it produced and its conception as a social project. The contemporary administrative structure in rural areas is largely adopted from the commune government system – an old commune became a new town, old production brigades became new administrative villages, and old production teams became new villagers’ groups. For example, the Shigushan production brigade, which settled in and managed the central settlement of Fenghuang People’s Commune, was converted to Shigushan village with minor changes in its administrative structure (from 9 teams to 7 groups) and no change at all regarding its juridical boundary.

More importantly, the territorial structure of modular units is spatially inscribed on China’s rural territory through the land division for

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21 Cenrally-determined control and overly-restrictive organisation gradually brought about the demise of the commune system. In addition to removing surplus produce, the state acquisitioned produce required to cover the subsistence needs of rural communes, resulting in the Great Famine. The seemingly glorious image of the city was constructed on a dying countryside. The promises of higher income and better quality of life were never fulfilled and possibilities for developing infrastructure and welfare were denied. Thus, rural development and the peasantry were exploited to support urban industries. Therefore, the commune system is too easy a target to blame for the failure of rural development at the time. After the abolishment of the commune system, the urban biased strategy has continued in different forms, which will be discussed in the following sections in this chapter.

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23 This information was obtained during my interview with the then vice-leader of the Shigushan Production Brigade in August, 2017.
collective ownership at a village level. As a fundamental layer of territorial organisation, the land system is especially important in rural China, as it is tied to the management of populations through state institutions. The division of land determines the boundary of administration and agricultural production for each administrative village, all of which have been crystallised into a mat-like spatial pattern of rural settlements. This spatial distribution is distinctly different from the normative Western countryside: a punctuated field with farmsteads spread out as markers in an open expanse of land. (Fig. 12) It is the collective land ownership of every administrative village that sets an explicit juridical and spatial blueprint for the contemporary Chinese countryside.

(Fig. 12) Samples of Different Rural Territories (same scale)
Source: Google Earth

Note: To an extent, land ownership boundaries can be seen as invisible walls that enclose a plot. Further subdivision occurs inwards instead of expanding outwards. This manifests the same logic of traditional city making in China, where modular division and subdivision of a territory is key. Both land ownership boundaries and city walls are symbolic and serve as instruments through which a political and spatial order is created and sustained.
The famous dictum from Deng Xiaoping, the leader who introduced far-reaching economic reforms in China, is very telling. It states in plain words the justification for establishing strict hierarchies in the territorial organisation.

The justification hinges on assumptions that economic development is most efficiently achieved in a few concentrated centres; that the benefits of economic growth are then to benefit the rest of the territory; and that rural-urban disparity and social inequality are consequently resolved. In short, the trickle-down effect. In the Chinese context, the tiered structure that organises major and minor centres in a hierarchical way is seen as fundamental to developmental planning, advocated by government officials and planners alike. The underlying idea is that the integration of economic development in a given territory, a city, a province or a nation, can be achieved by incorporating the planning of economic growth into a carefully constructed framework consisting of different levels of spatial agglomerations.

This very idea has restructured China’s territory, starting from the national level. Following Deng’s ‘Ladder-Step Doctrine’, the Chinese territory is divided into three regions, the coastal, the central and the western region.

Let some people get rich first.
- Deng Xiaoping, 1978
one cities are located in the coastal region. The distinction between these three regions has been consolidated and reinforced throughout China’s forty years of urbanisation, which has made the coastal region, such as the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta, the ultimate destination of China’s 245 million floating population. The coastal region has already witnessed the disappearance of traditional agriculture and rapid rural industrialisation, while the counterpart in the western region is still struggling with poverty due to the lack of both natural resources and investment.

In the recent decade, the central region has gradually become the centre of attention. Wuhan, the capital city of the Hubei province, is the ‘central city in the central region’, a title officially granted by the state. It consists of seven central districts and six suburban districts, governing a population of 10 million and a territory of roughly 8,500 km². Its leading role in administration, economy, culture, education and transportation in the central region makes it next in line to join tier-one cities. Meanwhile Wuhan still has a vast underdeveloped rural territory, as there are only around 550 km² built up areas within its 8,467 km² total territory, and the percentage of rural investment only reaches around 3.1% of the total amount. With Wuhan’s developmental potentials, its vast rural territory is at the crossroad of extensive rural transformation. In China’s administrative system, a city ranks second in the five-level administrative division and is a conglomeration of the urban centres and vast rural hinterlands surrounding them. The decision-making power, resource allocation and service provision for the entire administrative territory are all concentrated in the prefectural government. Reviewing the map of Wuhan, the city’s administrative structure is actually manifested by its spatial structure – the presence of one dominant core and dependent peripheries. In other words, one highly urbanised core has the power of making decisions over the development taking place in its hinterland.

Suburban districts of Wuhan feature the same spatial structure within the administrative territory of the city. The Xinzhou district, one of the 6 suburban
districts of Wuhan, consists of one satellite city (where the district government is located), 9 sub-districts (equivalent to central districts of a city) and 3 towns (equivalent to suburban districts of a city). Even though the spatial structure remains overall the same, the periphery of a district is not only controlled by its own core but also the higher-level city core. For example, in the fiscal system, taxes collected by the district often benefit the prefectural administration more than itself. In terms of development opportunities, as prefectural government prioritises the city centre, potential investments are less likely to be allocated to the district (county) level. Moving down through the hierarchy, the Fenghuang town, a sub-area of the Xinzhou district, is comprised of one town centre (with one community) and 19 administrative villages. At this scale, the spatial pattern of rural settlement becomes clear: it is a mat upon which are concentrated rural villages that are distributed at relatively regular distances from one another, each accommodating several hundreds of households. This particular rural landscape echoes the institutional bond between rural population and their physical space – villages and farmland. At the end, the administrative village, as exemplified by Shigushan village, lies at the bottom of this hierarchical urban system. A Chinese village is in terms of governance defined as an administrative village. As its name suggests, it is above all an administrative unit, usually consisting of several small natural villages governed by a village committee. The farmland in its jurisdiction is legally owned by the village collective. In this regard, it is very important to note that a Chinese administrative village is a territorial concept, different from how it is understood in the West.

Fig. 15 County Level Administrative Units in China Highlighting Wuhan in the Central Region

29 Here, both the administrative village and community are administrative units that lie at the bottom of the five-level system. The town centre is considered an urban area and accordingly its form of governance unit is called a community.

30 Geographic studies show that in Hubei province, the disparity between the core and periphery is greater below the county level, namely between district (county)/town centres and their hinterland. See for example Lingyun Liu, “Hubei Sheng Xianyu Chengzhenhua Zizuzhi Guocheng, Jizhi Yu Kongjian Fanxing” [Organising Evolution Process, Mechanisms and Space Paradigm of County Urbanisation in Hubei Province], PhD Diss., (Huazhong University of Science and Technology, 2015), 81-85.
Fig. 16: Wuhan
Hubei Province, P. R. China

Fig. 17: Xiangfan District
Wuhan, Hubei Province, P. R. China
Admin: 1 Village Committees and 1 Community
Population: 1046 (Apr 27, 2016) / 266 households
Area: 1.9 km²
Agr. Land: 0.56 km²  Paddy Field: 0.33 km²  Woodland: 0.53 km²

Admin: 19 Village Committees and 1 Community
Population: 30,150 (Agr. 27,024) / 7,364 households
Area: 56.12 km²
Agr. Land: 19.09 km²
Avr. Income: 5690 RMB (Year 2009)
From the city to the village, it is clear that the core-periphery structure repeats itself, the effect of which multiplies when moving down through the hierarchy. The hierarchical structure of China’s administrative system leaves its countryside in an end-of-line condition, with small towns and villages forming satellites of satellites. (Fig.20) The administrative hierarchy strongly influences the territorial spatial structure and determines resource allocation, employment opportunities and service provision, which has led to the increasing outflow of labour (rural migrant workers), land (forceful requisition of land by government) and capital, the three most fundamental elements of agriculture, to cities. In this way, the hierarchical urban system has actively exploited rural areas in the name of long-term national economic development. As a result, the meaning and value of the countryside is always framed through the city, and its own identity and autonomy are long lost.

The effect of this territorial hierarchy has been augmented by modifications of the *hukou* system. As mentioned in the previous section, the *hukou* system was introduced to consolidate the planned economy in the collectivisation era. This continued until 1978, when economic reforms introduced capitalist market principles. While a planned economy must restrict labour mobility, a market-driven economy requires a mobile labour force. To this end, several strategic relaxations in the *hukou* system allowed temporary rural-to-urban migration, but granted these rural migrant workers limited rights to house ownership, employment and social welfare. In this way, when industrial development ceased to primarily rely on capital accumulation extracted from agricultural production after the 1980s, the role of the countryside shifted and has become essential to the supply of a mobile labour force – the floating population – for urbanisation of frontier cities.

The floating population is characterised by its lack of legal status and exclusion from social welfare. These rural migrant workers normally work in labour-intensive industries while living in rural enclaves – the urban villages – on

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31 This is not confined to relationships at one level but rather extend across the nation and to the wider world. When China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, the national economy had been increasingly integrated into the system of world capitalism. National self-sufficiency in food production has been called into question since 2004, when China became a net food importer. The global market has reshaped the structure of national agricultural production. World core regions, the North, exploit the agricultural economy of their periphery, the South. For example, the Green Revolution in India has enabled multinational capital to buy up local farms and take full control of seeds and has led to an increasing number of landless farmers, although technological advancement has significantly increased productivity in agricultural production. National core regions are dominated by global centres as they themselves dominate their own peripheries. Therefore, the international hierarchical structure forms a global chain of power and control that perpetuates the exploitation of rural territory.
the periphery of a city, as they have no right to subsidised public housing and commodity housing in cities is usually far beyond their means. In other words, they fuel urbanisation without themselves having rights to the city.

Indeed, being legally undocumented, economically unrecognised and spatially marginalised puts this group in a volatile situation. This 245 million population, constituting more than one sixth of the entire population of China, reveals the mounting pressures on social equality and stability as well as sustainable future development.⁶

While a rural hukou generally prohibits rural migrant workers from receiving urban welfare, it secures these workers at the same time ‘three rights’ (san quan) in the countryside: the contracted land use right, the house site use right and the collective income distribution right. Due to this, the countryside remains the home community for rural migrant workers, a community they can return to when the labour market in cities is in crisis. Therefore, as argued by sociologist He Xuefeng, the countryside can be seen as a ‘stabiliser’ of China’s urbanisation.⁷ With urbanisation exploding, the hukou system has gradually become a rural ‘protection policy’, as the land use rights restriction to rural hukou citizens prevents urban capital from taking over rural development.

However, an on-going hukou reform⁸ that aims at abolishing the divide between the rural and urban hukou will remove this ‘last barrier’ to the urbanisation of the countryside. Throughout its seven-decade history, from the first introduction to the forthcoming abolishment, the hukou system has been an essential instrument of the state power in regulating the rural-urban relationship. The state’s ambition for this hukou reform is exemplified by the ‘People-Centred Urbanisation’ agenda, clearly expressed in the Report on the Work of Government 2014.⁹ The essence of this agenda is to integrate rural migrant workers into the urban landscape and to then transform this

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⁶ The floating population has thus frequently been labelled ‘a ticking social time bomb’ or ‘China’s Achilles’ Heel’.  
⁸ The hukou reform began in 2011 and is expected to be fully implemented in 15 to 20 years. In February 2011, the official document ‘Guanyu Jiji Wentuo Tuijian Huji Guanli Zhidu Gaige De Tongzhi’ [About the Promotion of the Hukou Reform], announced by the General Office of the State Council of the P. R. China, used the term ‘free migration’ for the first time. It marked the starting point of the hukou reform.  
⁹ The 2014 report was delivered by Li Keqiang, Premier of the State Council, at the Second Session of the Twelfth National People’s Congress on 5 March 2014. This report is an annual official document that summarises the government’s work of the previous year, presents plans for the current year and is commonly seen as the constituting guidelines for national policies.
unstable element into extra stimulation for China’s domestic consumption rates, easing the country’s reliance on the export sector for economic growth. Prior to its nationwide implementation, experiments were carried out in coastal regions, such as the Guangdong province and Anhui province, where urban development is more advanced. A typical situation trialled involves rural residents giving (either willingly or forcibly) local governments the rural land use rights attached to their rural hukou status in exchange for government-subsidised apartments in cities. Therefore, the reform will also free up a large amount of rural land. In this way, the vast territory of the Chinese countryside will be wide open for urban capital to flood in. It is not an overstatement to say that an even fiercer wave of urbanisation than previously seen is gradually unfolding in the countryside.

Under the title of ‘Carrying out a new type of people-centred urbanisation’, Li sets out three main goals: 1) grant urban residency to 100 million people who have moved to cities from rural areas; 2) rebuild rundown areas and ‘villages’ within cities where 100 million people are currently living; and 3) guide the process of urbanisation for 100 million people in the central and western regions.
Journey:
From the centre of Wuhan to its peripheries, approaching Xinzhou district.
Rural migrant workers living in the temporary shelter on the construction site.
Journey:

Going through Xinzhou district, one of the 6 suburban districts of Wuhan, a mix of industrial zones, housing development blocks, large-scale infrastructure and scattered villages, approaching Fenghuang town.
Arriving at the centre of Fenghuang town, where new apartment buildings are rising from the agricultural field.
Travelling in rural China today, one may encounter colourful billboards on the side of main roads stretching out from the central city. They are neither commercial advertisement nor traffic signs. Often in bold letters it reads ‘Building a New Socialist Countryside’, with a glamorous commercial rendering of a new village or a new town shown as its background. The fantasy world depicted in the image and the decaying, rustic landscape in the background are in stark contrast.

What one may also encounter is a single house in the middle of a newly-built road or a partially demolished building in a razed area: a construction site to be. These are called nail houses, the ugly truth concealed behind the beautiful billboards. From partially torn banners hanging outside one house, a few words can still be read: ‘property right, invading in private house and fighting against fascist’. Owners of these houses are not crazy. They are often simply rural residents who refuse to accept compensation for their house and land or who do not want to exchange their current houses for high-rise flats in newly-built settlements.

Between the end of 2005 and early 2007, China’s central government promulgated several official documents on the national programme ‘Building a New Socialist Countryside’. On the 1st of January 2008, the Urban and Rural Planning Law came into effect and replaced the original Urban Planning Law. This new planning law defines township and village planning as independent planning categories for the first time. Therefore, ‘Building a New Socialist
The current predominant strategy for rural development in China is called the 'Three Concentrations'. As its name suggests, this national strategy advocates concentrating rural industries into industrial zones, farmers into cities, towns and new rural residential settlements, and smallholdings into larger-scale organisation. Responding to the call of 'Building a New Socialist Countryside', in 2015 the Wuhan Planning and Design Institute designed a masterplan for a town-village system to guide the future development of the aforementioned Fenghuang town. The masterplan demonstrates a radical reconstruction of the town territory by integrating and regulating rural settlements in a tiered structure, namely the town centre, central villages and standard villages. On the one hand, to integrate scattered farmland for mechanised agriculture is a key rationale that underpins this restructuring. In order to do so without compromising the total amount of farmland, the most commonly adopted strategy is to reduce the footprint of rural settlement, that is to say, to encourage higher-density living. On the other, a parallel strategy, fostering non-agricultural developments in the countryside is also eagerly pursued. This means that the development of a town centre, which is considered urban, is largely prioritised. Comparing the existing construction land between urban and rural areas in 2013 with the proposed quota in the 2015–30 masterplan, the numbers dramatically shift from urban 0.4 km² and rural 53 km² to urban 22 km² and rural 28 km². This set of numbers clearly demonstrate how the development of rural hinterland in a town is oppressed through the distribution of the quota of construction land through planning. In this light, the 'Three Concentrations' strategy is leading to a spatial transformation of rural areas into densified, urbanised nodes punctuating a vast territory.

37. The original Chinese expressions of key terms in official documents are as follows: Building a New Socialist Countryside (Jianshe Shehui Zhuyi Xin Nongcun) and Urban and Rural Planning Law (Chengxiang Guihua Fa 城乡规划法).
38. Fenghuang town with a population of nearly 30,000 is a typical underdeveloped town in the outer suburbs of the city of Wuhan in central China.
39. Securing 'primary farmland' (jiben nongtian 基本农田) is required by China’s Land Law (1986).
40. Land in town centres is referred to as ‘urban’ and the remaining land in the jurisdiction of a town is referred to as ‘rural’. Statistics are from ‘Xinzhou District Urban System Planning 2015–30’ published by the Wuhan Planning and Design Institute.
41. In more developed rural areas, such as the Pearl River Delta, the rural economy has largely moved away from agriculture. Many villages have acted illegally by initiating industrial development on their collective farmland, ignoring government restrictions.

Fig.24 Fenghuang Town: Existing Condition (2013) v.s. Proposed Masterplan (2015–30)
This strategy is now so widely endorsed by both government officials and planners that few will question how it was originally formulated. The "Three Concentrations" originated in suburban development projects in Shanghai to respond to a high demand for construction land from both domestic and international investors. The high value of rural land at the periphery of a metropolis like Shanghai is the ultimate driver for demolishing villages and relocating existing residents to make room for new urban developments, often as part of a deal between the local government and private developers. When adopted for rural regeneration, this strategy is instrumental for concentrating farmland, which is now considered essential to accomplish economies of scale and thus a key aspect of modernising agriculture. However, regardless of the different contexts, the essence of land appropriation remains at its core.

In Western modes of agriculture, such land integration is mainly conducted by large private agribusiness firms. In the Chinese context, a similar mode has been pursued by the state through so-called 'dragon-head enterprises' (longtou qiye). These large agribusiness firms are expected to be the leading force of economic growth. To enable this mode of rural development, government subsidies and privileged policies have been widely employed by local governments to attract investments of this kind. In most scenarios, local farmers are offered jobs in the large new enterprises in exchange for their contracted farmland. Thus, farmers become wage labourers, and farmland, the means of production, goes into the hands of large enterprises. In this sense, the collective land ownership preserves the last bargaining chip for rural community to prevent urban capital pouring into countryside and taking over. Unsurprisingly, from market-oriented points of view, this has been blamed as the biggest obstacle to rural prosperity by economists and government officials alike.

The Pearl River Delta with arguably the most advanced economy in China has many villages that no longer fit into the category of a traditional agricultural community in terms of economic activity and occupation structure. Yet these areas are still undergoing a process of ‘Building a New Socialist Countryside’. The most prominent target is, indeed, the large amount of land that is still collectively owned by these village communities. Therefore, the current rural planning is also a process of negotiation over land ownership between the state and village communities. Under the banner of ‘Coordinated Planning’, the current government-led rural regeneration programme has started trials to combine spatial planning and land-use planning. It is an attempt to impose and reinforce the state’s power to redistribute land, an action that precedes the implementing of new orders in a territory.43

Ultimately, this issue of gaining power over land (re)distribution in the current rural regeneration follows the same logic applied to determine how urbanisation in cities is carried out. China’s current land system is determined by the 1982 Constitution, in which Article 10 states that ‘land in the cities is owned by the state’ and ‘land in the rural and suburban areas is owned by collectives except for those portions which belong to the state in accordance with the law’.44 In the urban context, as part of the economic reforms, land use reforms were introduced to create a legal framework for land transactions that allows private developers to lease state-owned land for a fixed term.45 This land market can be seen as a compromise between the state-driven economy and market-forces. As a result, the mega-plot, a form of parcelisation of land serviced by large-scale streets, has emerged as an efficient planning mechanism and has been a predominant planning model until now. Highly reliant on property speculation, the mega-plot is first and foremost economically driven. Cost-efficient through its use of repetition, it is capable of rapid yet homogeneous urban development on tabula rasa sites, and results in extensive urban sprawl and fragmentation. The mega-plot model thus embodies the core tenet of market-driven development: the need to expand. Economic gains outweigh all other considerations and the polarisation of rich and poor is the inevitable result. Beneficiaries of the state’s intervention in the market are entities already in possession of capital (large enterprises) and power (local governments). It is certainly not a coincidence that a rural land market is emerging at this strategic point of rural regeneration, resulting from recent land policies that are modifying step by step the use right of collectively owned land and thus creating channels for urban investor to acquire rural land.46

43 History repeats itself. Before the commune movement was launched, a series of land reforms was introduced through which the state took land from federal landlords and created a new land law for state-/collective-ownership of land nationwide.
44 The current Constitution of the People’s Republic of China was adopted at the Fifth Session of the Fifth National People’s Congress and promulgated for implementation by the Proclamation of the National People’s Congress on 4 December 1982.
45 See Land Administration Law 1986. The period for which private real estate companies can lease land varies depending on the land use type.
46 In November 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee legislated on the transfer of the rural contracted land management right. This signalled the establishment of a rural land market in China.
that land appropriation is the key moment of rural transformation through the government-led planning.

Large-scale land appropriation inevitably causes widespread relocation of rural populations.47 As previously discussed, the attempt to drive rural populations to small cities and central towns is facilitated by the on-going hukou reform. Though seemingly offering a legal channel to urban citizenship, the hukou reform severs the link between rural residents and their land. This separation between producers and their means of production reduces landless ex-farmers to simply an unskilled mobile labour force needed in cities. Therefore, while an emerging rural land market facilitates the acquisition of land, the hukou reform legitimises the displacement of rural populations. In this regard, the resultant territorial transformation, with old villages being erased and new ones springing up, represents an on-going social engineering. Desperate resistance from the people is exemplified by the phenomenon of ‘nail houses’ in relocation projects, which is often suppressed by the state or eventually settled through economic compensation. Hereby, through concentrations, rural planning is the very instrument to reconstruc socio-spatial orders in the rural territory, that is, to carry out a process of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation48 of Chinese countryside.

Issues of rural regeneration are not confined to the rural. What is particularly significant about the new Urban and Rural Planning Law is that basic categories of planning, namely city, town, township and village, not only operate at their own territorial scale, but are coordinated in one single scheme – the planning of the urban system.49 This means rural planning cannot be understood outside this larger framework.

In fact, under the banners of ‘Rural-Urban Integration’ and ‘Coordinated Planning’, this grand single scheme is the very instrument to bring the hierarchical urban system previously discussed to a whole new level. For example, Wuhan’s new urban system masterplan (2010-20) manifests a clearly tiered structure, consisting of 1 central city, 11 new ‘cities’, 15 central towns and 29 standard towns.50 This tiered structure creates a single graded system that encompasses diverse development policies, demonstrating a continuum of spatial planning practice across the entire urban and rural territory. Administration at every level is required to produce a masterplan guiding future development; and each masterplan needs to follow the guidance of the one developed at its higher level. As David Bray puts it succinctly:

Henceforth, economic development, land use management, and rural settlement location had to be considered together through coordinated planning, and through a jurisdictional hierarchical system stretching from the province down through cities, counties, towns, and rural townships.51

As such, the administrative hierarchy dominates the planning practice and makes the current planning system highly centralised. The rural hinterland is now brought into a coordinated spatial hierarchy, through which the entire administrative territory is organised and governed. In the Wuhan urban system masterplan, the rural territory is made of urban nodes and transportation links overlaid onto topographical maps.52 Thus, what rural-urban integration means is to insert and develop central towns to urbanise the countryside.53 Central towns are expected to generate non-agricultural employment in order to absorb surplus labour from the agricultural sector, playing the role of service and commercial centres, local industrial centres and intermediate markets for agricultural products and machinery. This policy is evident in the popular slogan ‘Cities-led Rural Development’ promoted by the government officials and planners. For them, to solve rural problems, urbanisation still remains key.
Fig. 25: Wuhan Urban System Masterplan (2010–20)
Source: Wuhan Municipal Government; English annotations by the author

Fig. 26: Wuhan Urban System Masterplan (2010–20): Growth Centres in the Rural Areas
Source: Wuhan Municipal Government; Processed by the author
Central towns proposed in the urban system are indeed growth centres. The discourse of regional planning in the West has seen the rise of the growth centre doctrine since the 1950s. In the context of Asian third-world countries, Dennis Rondinelli developed in the late 1970s the ‘Urban Functions in Rural Development Approach’ for the Bicol River Basin Project in the Philippines. This project employed a three-level classification of settlements (rural service, market town and regional urban centre) in which identified missing functions in rural regions were introduced. The most favourable function to be brought in is linked to the industrial sector. To this end, government subsidy, tax incentives and the construction of industrial estates are common stimulative policies. With selective investment, these central places were expected to drive rural development. This approach confronts criticism of its insufficiency in reflecting the diversity of rural context, such as rich varieties in agricultural crop regimes and the organizational structure of production. Apart from this, more importantly, as this approach relies on hierarchy, the choice of central places may end up strengthening existing places in power, such as administrative capitals, rather than empowering underdeveloped rural settlements. Therefore the question arises, how effective the approach of investing in central towns is for stimulating rural development?

Ten years after its completion, a study evaluating the Bicol River Basin Project revealed that neither the rural hinterland nor the towns themselves succeeded in fulfilling the roles assigned to them. Similar results were found by research on the performance of towns in Indonesia. Several explanations were offered for why central towns fall short of the expectations held for a growth centre. Transportations linkages between different levels of growth centres were believed to be essential. However, these linkages turned out much more beneficial for higher-level centres than towns at the bottom of the urban-rural hierarchical system. As a consequence, the expected development of agriculture was not achieved, nor was an increase in purchasing power by farmers, which was supposed to be the main benefit that would feed back into the growth of towns. In cases when a positive impact of multi-functional towns could be measured at the level of rural households, only relatively rich farmers were able to benefit. Rural inequality and poverty were exaggerated rather than reduced.

In other words, the prosperity of towns may actually build upon dispossessed rural households. While the intensification of the growth centre approach is to challenge the dominance of urban centres by fostering the growth of towns at lower levels of the urban system, the overall failure of central towns to generate rural development, at least in the Asian context, reveals that the hierarchical urban system is in fact reinforced. Growth centres are actually ‘theatres of accumulation’ that draw resources, labour and capital from their rural hinterlands.

In the logic of the growth centre doctrine that hinges on concentration, decentralisation strategies are often criticised for preventing economics of scale. However, concentration of human settlements and economic activities is not the only way to achieve economics of scale. Based on extensive studies of rural development issues in Asian counties, the Regional Network Strategy advanced by Mike Douglass in 1998 provides an alternative planning approach. Its key idea is to adopt different clusters of smaller-scale and diverse centres to avoid over-reliance on one leading centre. Douglass argues that with modern transportation and communication technology, the physical distance between settlements is shortened. This means a cluster of settlements with adequate distances between each other can play the role of a local ‘centre’ without physically being located in the same place. In addition, this strategy is also based on the acknowledgement of great diversity in rural settlements and their individual needs. In this light, existing flows of goods and people are indicators of clusters that are already in place. For Douglass, a more dispersed pattern of regional development would allow more horizontal, complementary and reciprocal relationships between various centres and their immediate hinterlands.

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52. The theoretical basis for the growth centres or growth pole doctrine dates back to the Central Place Theory developed by the German geographer Walter Christaller in the 1930s. Christaller’s theory aims to reveal the governing hierarchy behind the size, number and distribution of towns. His key conclusion is that central places are always strategically located in a network that ensures appropriate distance between nodes as well as their functional hierarchy behind the size, number and distribution of towns. See W. de Jong, J. G. L. Palte and F. van Steenbergen, “The Role of Banjarnegara as a Small Regional Center in Central Java,” The Indonesian Journal of Geography (January 1983): 37-52.


56. For example, during India’s Green Revolution of the 1960s, only rich farmers could afford to patent crops and thus benefit from new agricultural technologies.

57. Some research argues that the ‘backwash’ effect of growth centres only occurs in the early stages of development. The polarised situation eases as the system matures.
hinterlands. It is important to note that this strategy should not be simply understood as creating a denser distribution of growth centres, but rather indicates a crucial shift in the planning logic. Central to the network strategy are the circulation and movement of ‘people, production, commodities, capital and information’ and the distribution and management of resources. Therefore, this approach sees the entire territory as the subject of design rather than a few concentrated nodes and is thus a powerful spatial idea to rethink territorial organisation.

While the Regional Network Strategy primarily offers a critique to the growth centre doctrine in spatial terms, the Agropolitan Development advanced by John Friedmann, Mike Douglass and Clyde Weaver addresses this issue from the perspective of a socio-political project. In the context of an emerging world economy in the 1970s, the Agropolitan Development strategy was an attempt to resist transnational corporations taking over the countryside and to challenge the perception of a rural-urban divide as the face of nature. This strategy was particularly inspired by and devised for Asia’s coastal regions, as extremely high population densities in their rural areas make it possible to ‘bring the city to the countryside’. As a spatial strategy, an agropolitan district still has a central town with governmental functions and dispersed villages, encompassing an overall population between 50,000-150,000. The size of such a district should be small enough to provide convenient access to services for local residents, yet large enough to allow diversity in economic activities.

All of these underpin the most important objective of this strategy, that of an empowerment of the dispossessed and disenfranchised. This empowerment can be achieved by granting households access to the bases of rural power: to farmland and water and to a democratic process of decision-making. Agropolitan Development as a social and political concept thus puts forward the importance of preserving the integrity of rural households and village communities and the devolution of political and administrative power from the state as an essential precondition for true development.

60 The Regional Network Strategy requires a settlement to play multiple roles in different clusters at different levels, which means interrelated activities need to be coordinated at a local level. Consequently, it is more difficult for the local government to manage than a central town, which is an obstacle for the implementation of this strategy. To this end, Douglass stresses the need for coordinated and integrated planning by government within the existing provincial and district boundaries.

61 The Agropolitan Development strategy was first proposed by John Friedmann and Mike Douglass in 1979 and later revised and further developed by Friedmann and his student Clyde Weaver. In 1997, Friedmann proposed a number of modules for urbanisation as a modified version of Agropolitan Development.

62 Friedmann and Douglass extensively researched rural developments in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand in East Asia and their relationships to core-capitalist countries, such as the United States.


65 Agropolitan Development has been challenged by scholars such as Richardson and Hackenbergs on the basis that this type of bottom-up approach would only be effective if the state were willing to take strong leadership. For example, South Korea’s ‘New Village Movement’ of the 1970s is widely regarded as a successful national project for rural development and involved substantial direct investment from government.
The alliance between the centralised planning regime and the land reform has driven the dramatic transformation of the Chinese countryside. The result of this alliance has been the radical reorganisation of rural territory and the aggressive relocation of the rural population, or what Karl Marx described as the 'Clearing of Estates', the last process of wholesale expropriation of the agricultural population from the soil. In this narrative, growth centres play an important role as frontiers of capitalistic accumulation. The growth centre doctrine as its principle tool, spatial development planning became the handmaiden of transnational capital. The dramatic transformation of the Chinese countryside. The result of this alliance has been the radical reorganisation of rural territory and the aggressive relocation of the rural population, or what Karl Marx described as the ‘Clearing of Estates’, the last process of wholesale expropriation of the agricultural population from the soil. In this narrative, growth centres play an important role as frontiers of capitalistic accumulation. In *Territory and Function*, Friedmann and Weaver are outspoken on this point: ‘With the growth centre doctrine as its principle tool, spatial development planning became the handmaiden of transnational capital’. Spatial planning signals the moment of redistribution, when the flow of labour, resources and capital perpetuates itself through functional zoning and circulation arrangement, and in which the process of appropriating land is often concealed. In other words, land appropriation is embedded in the reconstruction of the territory and yet is largely naturalised and rationalised by planning. In a hierarchical system, this process stretches across the nation to every single village. Power and the ability to appropriate are embedded in hierarchies of all sorts, in this instance the hierarchy between the countryside and the city, between major and minor centres and within the administrative system. As hierarchy creates asymmetrical relationships, capitalism advances itself through reinforcing and reproducing hierarchies through territorial organisation. Making people’s livelihoods dependent on this very process is capitalism’s most powerful means.

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**1.4 A Project of the Territory**

An alternative model of rural development must move away from the idea of concentration, which privileges urban planning strategies. Yet the rural approach, such as the ‘Integrated Rural Development Programme’ implemented in India at the end of the 1970s, which sees rural development as a village-agriculture problem that excludes explicit urban components, has not been able to realise a two-way rural-urban relationship either. To rethink concentration is to see the task of rural development as a question of territory rather than of centrally-controlled, urbanised nodal points.

Territory here should not be mistaken as synonymous with a given environment. Instead, territory is a machine through which the process of appropriation, redistribution and production is organised and spatialised in the forms of settlement patterns, land division, infrastructure networks and administrative boundaries. Tackling issues of rural regeneration through central towns is an approach that falls within the hierarchical urban system and would thus ultimately enhance the hierarchy. In contrast, the historical conception of rural territory, the collective ownership of rural land and the still-influential mentality of collectivity in China reveals a territorial logic, one built upon self-organised and self-governed communities through localised, overlapping socio-spatial networks. More exactly, the organisation of land distribution in relation to land ownership and management, the provision of public facilities and infrastructure and even elements of the landscape are just as important as the built settlement, and all these components constitute a territorial unit.

Based on this understanding, the opportunity for an alternative rural regeneration model lies in the current system of land management and household registration. As mentioned, the three rights associated with a rural hukou are the contracted land use right, the house site use right and the collective income distribution right. In the previous decade, the Chinese state has pushed for the further separation of rural land contract relations, by which the contracted land use right would be divided into a stock right and a management right. The former is held by rural households and the latter is open to the rural land market. As recently as January 2018, the Minister of Land and Resources of the PRC announced that China will explore a similar separation of the rural house site use right, which includes an ownership right for the village community, a qualification right for rural households and a use right that can be used to facilitate new approaches to housing provision in rural areas.

These strategic separations in land use rights and house site use rights, the two most fundamental rights that a Chinese rural citizen is entitled to, are opening up new possibilities.

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ground for stakeholders to participate in the country’s on-going process of rural regeneration. Although the current state strategy favours private developers, there is still momentum and an opportunity for village communities to take action and to organise themselves beyond the limits of a single administrative village to form a managing body and take control.

Self-organisation is not new to rural China, even after the economic reforms. Though the commune system has been abolished, it has left rural populations with the collective ownership of rural land, the idea of collectivity and the close social relationships formed in a village community, elements that are essential to fostering local socio-economic organisations. Resilient bottom-up enterprises flourished across the coastal region in the 1980s and 1990s, and hundreds of millions of farmers were able to lift themselves out of poverty.21 This first wave of semi-spontaneous village- or town-based enterprises has been declining since the turn of the 21st century when China joined the World Trade Organisation. Nevertheless, despite the government’s support for dragon-head enterprises, the number of rural co-operatives is still increasing today,22 and funding mechanisms are gradually being created by central government to support them. The ‘community stock co-operative’ can be understood as a village-run company that is based on collective assets, especially house sites. ‘The ‘land stock co-operative’ collectively manages a considerable amount of contracted farmland that originally belonged to each household. These two types of rural co-operatives are formed based on the three rights of rural households. Following a different logic, the ‘farmers’ specialised co-operative’ typically established a chain of agricultural production, processing and marketing for a specific product, with some focusing, for example, on service provision for rural communities, such as information technologies. There is a fourth type of co-operative, which establishes direct links between household farms in the countryside and consumer groups in cities, for example, via agreements with supermarkets and direct-selling communities. Despite their differences, most co-operatives are primarily driven by economics. This economic aspect is even emphasised by the Co-operative Law 2007, which defines the ‘farmers’ specialised co-operative’ as an economic organisation based on mutual assistance. The market system in traditional China has already revealed that economic relations alone are far from enough to construct a viable social structure for rural society. In order to formulate and sustain vigorous communities, the rural co-operative model must go beyond the purely economic dimension and diversify to engage in more welfare-oriented functions that impact the everyday lives of rural populations. Clearly, the call for self-organisation and self-governance in contemporary Chinese rural society is not a nostalgic throwback but a strategic, grounded proposition.

From a different perspective, one of the key issues in agriculture is the distribution of land and labour and its relationship to the efficiency of production. Under the current Household Contract Responsibility System, the rural population is increasing yet the amount of farmland is fixed or even decreasing, with further subdivision leading to a more scattered land pattern. Many economists argue that scattered rural land is the biggest obstacle to increased productivity. Industrialised agriculture is thus favoured for its efficiency. Yet, the extremely low ratio of arable land versus labour in rural China (and in many other East Asian countries as well) presents a fundamentally different context from that of agriculture in advanced capitalist countries.23 Economist Philip C. C. Huang argues that if China pursued the same level of intense farming found in the United States or the United Kingdom, it would not be able to absorb all available labour without driving landless farmers to cities to eventually become the new urban poor. Instead of industrialising agriculture, Huang suggests that further intensification of both labour and capital within a land area unit can allow smallholdings to achieve the full employment of rural populations and higher income per labourer.24 Furthermore, industrialised farming homogenises agricultural products and targets national and international markets, thereby eroding local economies and posing a threat to national food security.25 In addition, the maintenance of the diversity of agricultural production is crucial to preserving local ecology. Although less efficient in economic terms, smallholdings still offer a viable mode of production and reflect strong social and ecological values. Thus, the two modes of agricultural production – the smallholding and mechanised farming – should be combined. Spatially speaking, the difference between a smallholding and mechanised farming is manifested by the division of land. Therefore, the two different patterns of land division constitute a basic index of territorial organisation.

71 Interestingly, John Friedmann regards the development of township- and village-based enterprises in China as the realisation of his vision of a ‘city in the fields’.
72 The term ‘rural co-operative’ should be subject to a series of refinements as different types of co-operatives can be drastically different in terms of their organisation, management and sources of investment. Some organisations use the name co-operative but operate like large agribusinesses, which deprive local farmers of the three rights associated with a rural/co-op.
73 In 2015, the proportion of arable land in China per farm labourer was 0.6 hectares, while the figure for the United States was 52 hectares per farm labourer, more than 80 times that of China.
75 China has been a net food importer since 2004. For example, in 2012, China imported more than 5,200,000 tons of corn, the price of which makes the corn produced by Chinese farmers less competitive. Therefore, fewer rural populations are willing to rely solely on their land to make a living, especially farmers of basic grains as cash crops perform better economically. National food security is being increasingly emphasised by the state. ‘Outline of the Program for Food and Nutrition Development in China (2014-2020)’ published by the General Office of the State Council states that basic self-supply of cereals and absolute safety of food grains shall be guaranteed. http://www.swtfchina.com/display.aspx?F Newman162651, accessed 9 May 2017.)
Based on the above discussion of modifications in the rural land system, the contemporary rural co-operative and different modes of agricultural production, a socio-economic basis for a project of the territory is outlined. At the management level, the project proposes that co-operatives be formed as legal bodies by rural households to organise the members’ management of contracted land and house site use rights. When joining a co-operative, rural households retain the stock right of their land and the qualification right of their house site. These two rights would make rural households shareholders of the co-operative, a situation that is fundamentally different from that of a wage labourer in a large agribusiness. Thus, a new set of labour relations is created through which rural residents can actively participate in agricultural production as both producers and shareholders as well as being involved in non-agricultural activities. Through the increased productivity of collectively managed land, a diversified economy and the required support from government, rural co-operatives would be economically viable. This makes the devolution of decision-making power possible and gives rural communities the ability to support their own development in the long term. This approach creates a contemporary institutional foundation for self-organisation and self-governance at the level of village communities. (Fig.27)

Ultimately, the rural co-operative has the potential to induce the formation of local socio-economic circles and bypasses in the territorial hierarchy in order to reduce dependency on the hierarchical urban system. (Fig.28)

Thus, at a territorial level, spatial interventions should be devised based on their instrumentality to facilitate and enhance the socio-economic mechanisms mentioned above. In this light, the project proposes to create better connections among villages as well as with existing local centres via a denser network of roads. As part of a new infrastructure network, public facilities are distributed based on this new road network rather than concentrated in local centres and respond to the needs of different rural co-operatives in terms of, for example, communal activities, agricultural production, processing and marketing, and vocational training and education. Collaborations between village communities beyond their administrative boundaries are encouraged and a certain level of integration of land should be allowed, for example, parcels of

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76. Rural developments in Japan and South Korea suggest that investment in other agricultural elements such as fertiliser and seed can effectively increase productivity. In this light, government subsidies for these elements could also be a means to improving the performance of smallholdings.

77. Establishing the chain of agricultural production, processing and marketing is what economist Philip C.C. Huang calls vertical integration. For him, this is a fundamental strategy for rural co-operatives to preserve the model of smallholdings at the production end and to embrace economies of scale at processing and marketing levels. Huang argues that this approach leads to a high employment rate and economic gains can also be achieved.

78. The operating scale of the rural co-operative often challenges the administrative division. In the current planning system, the administrative village is the basic unit in a masterplan. However, economic networks developed through rural co-operatives have gone far beyond the village as certain new forms of economic activities no longer require a static relationship with the land.
land for mechanised farming may arise subject to agreement between the participating bodies. This proposal can thus be understood as an elastic framework upon which a territorial unit is built in both social and spatial terms. In contrast to a rigid, static model, this framework can adapt to different contexts and respond to differences in typography, natural resources, population density, occupational structure and so on. Thus, all these elements constitute a contextualised layer of infrastructure to be superimposed over and interwoven into the existing territorial structure, together forming an interlocking socio-spatial network.

In essence, the project of the territory is built upon an elastic form of association within a territorial unit through which the self-organisation and self-governance of rural communities can be fostered. Admittedly, every system or network that features a certain degree of complexity will require a hierarchy of some sort. However, the superimposition of different layers of structures and infrastructure would effectively reduce the dominance of any single layer. As discussed, in current territorial organisation, the spatial scale aligns with the scale of administration. An additional territorial layer of distribution, organisation and governance would effectively challenge this alignment and thus create bypasses in the hierarchy. To put it differently, the networked territorial unit represents an alternative, local force that can participate in and then challenge the process through which the flow of labour, resources and capital is controlled and managed. It is designed to function parallel to the state machinery, empowering rural civic society.

The organisation of China’s rural territory through modular units based on clearly defined social ties reveals a distinct form of both social and spatial arrangements. The project of the territory revisits this socio-spatial mechanism to propose a model of the self-organised territorial unit for contemporary rural regeneration in China. As David Harvey puts it, ‘once a particular spatial form is created it tends to institutionalise and, in some respects, to determine the future development of social process’. Space is not preceded by power, rather, the agency of spatial design lies in restructuring social relationships and enacting ideas of how society can and ought to be organised. It is in this sense that architecture and planning are political disciplines. To problematise, understand, reshape and govern social relationships through spatial design is the architecture of the territory.

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For example, as mentioned, the fourth type of rural co-operative creates a direct link between rural producers and consumers in urban communities. This link creates more horizontal and complementary relationships between rural and urban areas.

Wuhan is selected as the context to put forward design scenarios following the principle strategies outlined. The design strategies pioneered in Wuhan city can potentially serve as an example for the transformation of rural territory around emerging tier-two cities, which will be the frontier of China’s national development in the coming decades.

Among Wuhan’s 6 suburban districts in the outer ring of the city, Xinzhou district has a territory of 1,500 km² and two major centres. One is the capital of this district, the centre of administration and economy. The other is a concentrated industrial zone near the Yangtze River, the rise of which is the result of the outsourcing of heavy industries and harbour transportation from the central city. The rest of its territory, consisting of 9 sub-districts and 3 towns, remains primarily rural. Fenghuang town, the poorest town in Xinzhou district, consists of 19 administrative villages and 1 community in the town centre, accommodating a population of roughly 7,300 households and 30,000 people. On the one hand, the scale of the town is adequate to allow for the expansion and diversification of economic and social networks. On the other hand, the establishment of a territorial unit and rural co-operatives requires closer links to rural producers and households to guarantee that the local population has adequate access to services. These smaller-scale organisations would also help to incorporate local knowledge into the process of planning and implementation. Therefore, the project is tested on the scale of a town.

In the context of Fenghuang town, the design scenario demonstrates, through a phasing strategy, how five villages together with the existing town centre are transformed into one relatively mature territorial unit and another in its early stages. The road network connecting these five villages consists of upgraded existing roads and a few new ones. These roads form a north-south pathway in addition to the national road that currently only passes through the town centre, with several west-east roads connecting these two pathways. A more evenly distributed transportation system is thus created, which can have significant implications for the development of rural co-operatives. In a basic sense, this transportation system serves as a spatial framework that organises and expands public facilities, which is essential for organising production and welfare provision of a rural town. Existing schools, hospitals and factories are incorporated into a network that sees a range of service facilities distributed in participating villages and three higher-level facilities located along roads between villages. In principle, which and how many areas are transformed into mechanised farming will a result of negotiation among participating villages. All of this may appear to be physical infrastructure only. However, when various types of rural co-operatives, the distribution of smallholdings and mechanised farming and the regenerated rural land system within the territory of a rural town are woven together, physical infrastructure becomes social infrastructure.

In the early stages, in order to support the formation of rural co-operatives, the local government should provide initial investments for basic infrastructure. Further investments in infrastructure as well as welfare provision can be drawn in part from collective profits and in part from state funds. Admittedly, immediate economic gains for local governments may be limited. Yet a stable rural society and rising household consumption capacity will stimulate economic development in the long term and will also better address social equality.
Regerated Road System
Regerated Facility System - Proposed
Regerated Facility System - Existing
Town Centres
County/National Road Administrative Division at Town-Level
Waterway
Village Road
Village Settlement
Factory/School
Admin: 19 Village Committees and 1 Community
Population: 51,645 ( Apr. 31, 2016 ) / 9,396 households
Area: 19.09 km²
Avr Income: 5,690 RMB (Year 2009)

A Superimposed Layer of Socio-Spatial Networks Forming Territorial Units (with context) – Fenghuang Town

Current Map - Fenghuang Town

Xinhua District, Wuhan, Hubei Province, P.R. China
Phasing Strategy – Fenghuang Town:
The Formation of a Relatively Mature Territorial Unit and Another in Its Early Stages

A Superimposed Layer of Socio-Spatial Networks Forming Territorial Units (without context) – Fenghuang Town
Chap. 2

The Village Settlement
Framing the Cultural Nexus of Power
Contemporary rural settlements in China harks back to the Maoist Era’s collectivisation campaign, which began in the 1950s and swept ferociously across the entire country. Everyone in society, from Communist Party cadres to ordinary citizens as well as planners and architects, was mobilised in this state-led pursuit of all-encompassing modernisation.

In 1958, a poster depicting the dream of the future Chinese countryside entitled People’s Communes Are Good was published by the Shanghai Educational Publishing House. (Fig.30) In the foreground, a carefully constructed scene reveals the idyllic everyday life of the Hongqi People’s Commune. People of all ages and various social roles are precisely captured, and linked to the distribution of a complete set of public facilities. Their vividly depicted actions, customs and even facial expressions convey an inspirational message of a happy life, achieved in the people’s commune through the performance of assigned roles. In this glossy image of the then future rural life, the elderly are looked after in a rest home (named in the poster ‘Happy Home’) and the children are taken care of in a kindergarten and a primary school. The middle-aged female and male labourers are thus freed from the burden of taking care of a family and can devote themselves fully to collective production and services. They work in

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1. The figures who appear in the poster range from babies and toddlers to school-age children, adults and the elderly.

2. Such as farmers, factory workers, members of a Party cadre, soldiers, technicians, school teachers, telephone operators, librarians, spinners, laundrywomen and visitors as well as ordinary residents.
the canteen, public hospital, library, warehouse, telephone house, textile mill, laundry, cinema, shop and commune committee, which is drawn in the centre of the poster and marked by a red star, indicating that all activities and facilities are organised centrally by a committee. In addition, in the right-hand corner of the foreground, a row of armed soldiers stands near the gate. This indicates that military power is also part of the people’s commune. However, it is not just what is included in the poster that is worth considering; what is missing from the image also invites comment. As a meticulous detailed piece of art intended to instil in viewers an aspiration to become part of future rural life, the complete absence of family and housing is conspicuous, especially given that the family was at the heart of social organisation and modes of production in China at the time.

In fact, this omission reflects on the primary goal of the people’s commune system: to attack the family as a social institution and to redefine and reproduce a new collectivised form of life. In contrast to the housing units of rural villages of the time, the housing units designed for commune settlements abolished the family kitchen and minimised living rooms, resulting in a domestic space consisting of nothing more than a combination of bedrooms. This exemplifies the state’s radical attempt to eliminate the concept of family and to weaken patriarchal clan authority, two key elements deeply rooted in Chinese tradition. The focus here is that by doing so the state had to take over the social security and welfare responsibilities that were managed by the patriarchal clan system.

Thus, service provision became an essential instrument of collectivisation. This is exemplified by and spatialised through the settlement design for a unit population of 2,000 in the Hongqi People’s Commune.3 The composition of its urban plan centred on a collection of public facilities, around which four residential clusters were positioned. One multi-functional community centre was situated within an open area close to the riverside, and one primary school and one shop were each placed on the northern and southern sides of that open area respectively, but slightly off the central axis implied by the community centre. Each residential cluster, encompassing two production teams and roughly 500 residents, had one public canteen, one kindergarten and one storeroom for farm implements. The public canteen dominated the spatial organisation while housing slab blocks were arranged in orderly rows. Interestingly, in the case of the Hongqi People’s Commune, public buildings

The crucial role of service provision in collectivisation explains why the poster of the Hongqi People’s Commune went to great lengths to depict scenes of life enriched by a wide range of public facilities. Among them, the canteen deserves special attention. The significance of the canteen is not only implied through its central position in the poster, but also its architectural form. Unlike the rest of the facilities shown in the foreground, which are only drawn in part and overlap with one another, the canteen stands on its own and is depicted in the form of an enclosed courtyard house. Furthermore, a long table with large plates full of food extend outwards from the courtyard marks the entrance of the canteen, which is approached by a group of people representing all ages and genders. Entering the courtyard, people are seen sharing meals (rice and buns) around big tables. These detailed activities taking place in and outside this courtyard attract the eye and reinforce the dominant role that a public canteen plays in commune life.

Dining, the most essential activity of everyday life, became a compulsory collective activity. This was enforced by the elimination of the family kitchen in housing settlements, which meant that every member of a people’s commune had to eat in the public canteen. As shown in the canteen plan for the Hongqi People’s Commune, the main hall was the dominant space in the residential cluster. Fig 1. Apart from

4. All commune proposals showed strong spatial order in their urban plans and fellow two distinct strategies. In addition to the strategy designed to control daily routines through service provision, which is the focus of the present thesis, the other strategy sought to represent political power through spatial organisation dominated by a central area. For example, as seen in the proposed masterplan for the Panyu People’s Commune, which was located in the Shatian District in the Pearl River Delta and encompassed 1,757 rural households and 6,232 people. All Panyu’s settlements were to nestle at the foot of a hill linked by a main road running parallel to the hill. Settlements were laid out towards the hill, branching out from the main road. Central areas for each settlement, together with the main road, were the main organisational structure of the commune-plan, and clearly dominated the plan’s spatial organisation. Compared with the urban plans of the Hongqi People’s Commune and the Qui People’s Commune, the ideas of the modular unit was not so clearly expressed. Rather, settlements were arranged based on different functional zones. For example, the middle zone, situated in the west, was an education zone where classroom buildings were placed precisely on the central area. On both sides of the education zone, two residential settlements were arranged along the main streets, following a fishbone pattern, instead of being organised around public canteens. Public buildings were emphasised through prominent building massing and symmetrical composition. These features were attempts to strengthen the power and authority of state institutions and to create clearly legible political representatives of these institutions. For the original Panyu proposal, see Quangdong Panyu Renmin Gongye Shuai: Jumindian Xinren Gaiji Jiedao Sheji Jieshao [Design of New Buildings in Panyu District: General Layout and Development Plans for the Xinren Gaiji Jiedao (1959)] (Architectural Design for New Buildings in Shuiwei Settlement, Panyu People’s Commune, Guangdong Province), Architectural Journal (October 1959): 3-5.

5. Apart from encouraging collective living, the abolition of the family kitchen was also an attempt to liberate women from household in order to increase their productivity. This ambition was further strengthened by the inclusion of a day-care centre as standard in residential clusters.
dining activities, the main hall would also host gatherings for production teams, and other public facilities were integrated into the canteen, such as shower rooms, a laundry, a well in the yard, and two administrative offices. All these integrated functions taken together made the public canteen the centre of life for commune members. As meals took place at fixed times, the daily routine of a commune member was very much dictated.  

As the most imposing building in a residential cluster, the public canteen spatialised this dictatorship as well as the aspiration of a socialist lifestyle.  

Relating back to the dominant role that the canteen plays in the spatial organisation of commune settlement plans, these plans reveal the same aspiration for a new rural life as depicted in the poster, and the settlement design itself is a political manifesto for the commune system.

Nevertheless, it also becomes evident that the spatial organisation shown in the poster does not match the realised plans. The poster displays an entirely constructed scene to promote and legitimise the commune system – it is a mere allegory. Yet, when reading it as an architectural proposition, a paradox can be found. Despite the great ambition of the socialist regime to transform farmers into productive commune members, all the buildings in the poster are still depicted in the traditional courtyard house style. This contradiction reveals the state’s hesitation to completely reconstruct the existing ethos of rurality. The buildings’ stylistic representation is not the only evidence of this.

Commune planning was heavily influenced by the neighbourhood unit concept and the micro-district schema, as pointed out by Lu Duanfang in Remaking Chinese Urban Form: As an eager novice in the pursuit of modernity, the socialist state borrowed these two Western models as paradigms for China’s modern cities and modern lifestyles. Consequently, multi-storey apartment buildings, standardised public facilities and regulated roads and landscapes, typical elements of these two models, were widely used in commune proposals. These features of architectural design and planning became the concrete manifestation of a new rural aspiration that was to end traditional rural life. However, despite the strong influence of these modernist models and the socialist political climate, commune proposals such as that for the Hongqi People’s Commune, still paradoxically adopted the organisational logic of China’s traditional rural villages.

6 For example, in 1958, a cheerful crowd was captured on camera marching through the entrance of the Sanba canteen, where the slogans – ‘Collectivising the Everyday Life, Canteen is My Home’ – were prominently displayed.


8 The influence of the micro-district model was particularly strong given China’s close relationship with the Soviet Union. Soviet architects came to China to supervise the construction of new socialist cities and countryside.

Fig.33 Dining Hall in a Commune Canteen
Source: bbs.voc.com.cn

Fig.34 Slogans at the Entrance of the Sanba Canteen:
‘Collectivising the Everyday Life, Canteen is My Home’
Source: bbs.voc.com.cn

For example, in 1958, a cheerful crowd was captured on camera marching through the entrance of the Sanba canteen, where the slogans – ‘Collectivising the Everyday Life, Canteen is My Home’ – were prominently displayed.


The influence of the micro-district model was particularly strong given China’s close relationship with the Soviet Union. Soviet architects came to China to supervise the construction of new socialist cities and countryside.
The most typical type of village found in rural China is the 'kindred village'. In these villages, the majority of local households bear the same family name and the patriarchal clan system has a strong influence on the village's organisational structure. In other words, social order and spatial order are usually superimposed on each other in a kindred village. Yuwan village, located in Yangxin county, Hubei province, is a case in point. The origins of this village can be dated back to the Ming Dynasty, and its spatial organisation has remained relatively stable since the structure of the village was first established. Reviewing its urban plan, it can be seen that the distribution of ancestral temples dominates the arrangement of residential clusters. One central ancestral temple is situated at the centremost point of the village, linking residential clusters to the west and east. Each residential cluster then has one or two branch ancestral temples as its own local centre. The hierarchical social structure embedded in the patriarchal clan system—an extended family consisting of several family branches—is mirrored by the spatial relationship between the central ancestral temple and its branch ancestral temples. The high status of ancestral temples is expressed by the open space and pond to the front of the main entrance. This spatial arrangement is not only based on the rules of feng shui but also on the multiple roles of the ancestral temple. Originally the space was for rituals to worship a common ancestor. With the secularisation of modern society, ancestral temples gradually became common gathering places in a village, with activities held there ranging from annual events, such as festival performances, to household events, such as family reunions, weddings and funerals. Therefore, ancestral temples are dominant elements in a village's spatial organisation and centres of religious and social life.

Spatialising governmentality, the ancestral temple is to a traditional village what public facilities, especially canteens, are to a commune settlement. The attempt to replace clan authority with state institutions is signified by the replacement of the ancestral temple with public facilities in most commune proposals. The destruction of the spatial structures that represented a then disreputable social and cultural reality, such as ancestral temples and lineage halls, was carried out prior to the construction of new commune buildings. However, in some cases,
commune governments altered and then adopted the local ancestral temple as a temporary space for collective dining and gatherings. A still existing example is the assembly hall of the Tunan Production Brigade, which was rebuilt on the original site of an ancestral temple after it was torn down during the commune movement. It is the assembly hall of the Tunan Production Brigade, which was rebuilt on the original site of an ancestral temple. The paradox at the heart of commune architecture is that it relied on the very tradition it simultaneously negated. This juxtaposition of two opposing authorities is seemingly ironic yet revealing. On the one hand, the primary objective of the commune system was to attack the patriarchal clan system, on the other, the commune system resembled it. The clash between commune canteen and ancestral temple is not the only evidence. In fact, the social and cultural origins of the three-level organisation of a people’s commune can be traced back to the social structures of the traditional extended family, specifically, clan, guild and gang. However, just like the contradiction between commune canteen and ancestral temple, the skeleton of the traditional social institution was adopted precisely to destroy it. The process of de-territorialisation could turn out to be explosive, as it impacted social stability. Therefore, in response to this concern, the state destroyed existing social institutions yet simultaneously recreated them, drawing inspiration for the new from the traditional organisational structure of rural society. From a different perspective, this contradiction can be seen as the state appropriating the then-status quo of rural institutions in order to advance an alternative narrative that was able to justify a new form of power and authority. Adapting the spatial organisation of the traditional village in commune proposals and mimicking traditional architectural styles in propaganda posters were attempts to naturalise and legitimise the radical changes inherent in the commune institution. The paradox at the heart of commune architecture is that it relied on the very tradition it simultaneously negated.

Within the patriarchal clan system, the most basic social unit is the family. This means that it is primarily kinship that constitutes social identity, and thus kinship is responsible for forming basic social ties in rural society. Built upon this understanding, sociologist Fei Xiaotong put forward the concept of ‘a society of acquaintances’ characterising Chinese rural society: This means that it is primarily kinship that constitutes social identity, and thus kinship is responsible for forming basic social ties in rural society. Built upon this understanding, sociologist Fei Xiaotong put forward the concept of ‘a society of acquaintances’ characterising Chinese rural society. In a traditional village, a family’s neighbourhood is perceived in an elastic way rather than a fixed domain. The perception of a neighbourhood as the stage for everyday life is subject to the power and authority of the family concerned. This elasticity in social relations as well as in space was in sharp contrast to the commune ethos, which praised and demanded universal fraternity and impartiality among commune members. As a result, while kinship relationships were replaced by administrative relationships, the elastic structure was supplanted by rigid and predetermined roles within the commune system.

This disjunction was concurrent with changes in the power structure and the governance system. Within the clan system, the family was the basic governance unit of society, which was, to an extent, an autonomous structure limiting the control of the state. However, in the commune system, members were ruled by Communist Party cadres, who directly exercised control on behalf of the state. This change fundamentally restructured the Chinese rural society. Furthermore, the collapse of the managerial autonomy of rural families coincided with the destruction of their economic self-sufficiency in a household-based agricultural economy. The collectivised agricultural production was thus the sine qua non in the commune system. While the kinship-based social bond was shaped and driven by forces internal to the family, the reconstruction of social bonds between commune members and the state relied on a strong external state intervention, making social relations imposed and fragile. From this it can be seen that the reconstruction of power, authority and economy was carried out through and resulted in the restructuring of social relationships.

In fact, this radical reconfiguration is already implied by the seemingly harmonious background scene in the poster of Hongqi People’s Commune. In the poster, the borders of the commune settlement are framed by a river and large pieces of cultivated land where farmers and fishermen can be seen working enthusiastically. Across the arched bridge in the middle ground where agricultural and industrial activities merge together, warehouses are built to store the collectivised produce. This juxtaposition of two opposing authorities is seemingly ironic yet revealing. On the one hand, the primary objective of the commune system was to attack the patriarchal clan system, on the other, the commune system resembled it. The clash between commune canteen and ancestral temple is not the only evidence. In fact, the social and cultural origins of the three-level organisation of a people’s commune can be traced back to the social structures of the traditional extended family, specifically, clan, guild and gang. However, just like the contradiction between commune canteen and ancestral temple, the skeleton of the traditional social institution was adopted precisely to destroy it. The process of de-territorialisation could turn out to be explosive, as it impacted social stability. Therefore, in response to this concern, the state destroyed existing social institutions yet simultaneously recreated them, drawing inspiration for the new from the traditional organisational structure of rural society. From a different perspective, this contradiction can be seen as the state appropriating the then-status quo of rural institutions in order to advance an alternative narrative that was able to justify a new form of power and authority. Adapting the spatial organisation of the traditional village in commune proposals and mimicking traditional architectural styles in propaganda posters were attempts to naturalise and legitimise the radical changes inherent in the commune institution. The paradox at the heart of commune architecture is that it relied on the very tradition it simultaneously negated.

12 This assembly hall is located in Xianggang village, Nancun town, Panyu district, Guangzhou, Guangdong province, PRC. The building occupies a floor area of approximately 1,100 m² and has been abandoned for more than ten years. See news report http://www.zaixian.blta10038167zu04ahfrk accessed 16 April 2018.


14 In practical terms, as the commune controlled all resources, rural families that did not join the commune would not be able to survive.
store food, fertilizer plants are established to benefit agricultural production and even experimental farming plots are visible to the right-hand side. Compared with the large areas of cultivated land, less emphasis is placed on the industrial elements in the poster and industrial activities mainly seem to serve agriculture. These two layers together sketch out the principle means of production in a people’s commune: agriculture supplemented by industry. The discussed elements were meant to legitimise the newly established institutions of the commune system: autonomous units for both agricultural production and living quarters following an ethos of self-reliance. This emphasis signalled a fundamental reconstruction of the role and meaning of countryside and, thus, of rurality. This redefined rurality was constructed upon collectivised production and living, as well as direct government and management by the state, through which all social relationships were determined. Hereby, the commune system, an essential instrument of the state to radically restructure social relations, was in constant conflict with the subjectivities shaped by the family, which was a crucial factor in its failure.

The legacy of the commune system is today disputed. Some Chinese sociologists, such as Xu Yong and Chen Ming, assert that since the commune model was imported from the Soviet Union and caused a rupture of China’s long-existing family tradition, it is not to be considered a part of China’s ‘authentic culture’. They argue that only after the demise of the commune system, with the establishment of the Household Contract Responsibility System in the early 1980s, did a return to the family occur. However, as discussed in chapter 1, the collective land ownership of an administrative village, as well as the overall governance model, is in fact a continuation of the commune system. Therefore, the current rural governance and land systems cannot be simply regarded as either a legacy of the family tradition or that of the commune institution, but is rather a combination of both. In the commune model, the advantage of direct state government was an effective provision of public goods, which is a shortcoming of family-based governance. Accordingly, a large portion of physical infrastructure in the countryside today was constructed during the commune era, establishing an early form of rural social

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security. It thus cannot be denied that the collective dimension of a Chinese village community is part of rural reality today.

The ultimate task of the planning and designing of people’s communes was to spatialise a state institution in order to transform farmers into commune members through the practice of everyday life, where radical changes in social institutions led to the reconstruction of subjectivities. In other words, to instil collective aspirations in the peasantry and to raise their political consciousness was through politicising the fundamental operation of architecture: to settle.\(^16\) Commune settlements formalised the systematic arrangement of social roles, the choreography of which was crystallised through the distribution of public facilities as well as the composition of housing units. In this way, spatial design played an essential role in creating the conditions for habitation wherein farmers were forced to enact a socialist lifestyle, which aggressively articulated and enforced the social, economic and political shift during the commune era. The design of people’s commune settlement was thus, without doubt, a social, economic and political project. In this light, if the apparatus of economics and politics can be understood as a set of social relationships rather than numbers and political terms, the agency of spatial design, especially at the level of a community, lies in the construction of spaces that are able to transform social relationships.


\(^{17}\) The implementation of the commune system provided the perfect opportunity for the state to call for new architectural and urban models that could physically change the face of China. Architects and planners were urged to participate in this celebration of new design. By the autumn of 1955, several proposals for communes had been put forward in response to the state’s mobilisation of designers. The most pedagogical cases were published in Architectural Journal [ Jianzhu Xuebao 建筑学报], a mainstream architectural journal, and were promoted as paradigms for people’s communes.
With its roots in the people’s commune, the transformation of Shigushan village, located in Fenghuang town, Xinzhou district, Wuhan, in the last four decades exemplifies a shift from a historically collectivised rural community to a contemporary ‘inner-decaying village’ (kongxin cun). The Fenghuang town was then known as Fenghuang people’s commune, and Shigushan village, its central settlement, was called Shigushan production brigade. Though the commune system was implemented in Shigushan in 1958, the construction of a new commune settlement was only completed between 1973 to 1974 as a provincial model site for the people’s communes. Shigushan is also one of the few commune settlements that still exist today. However, with less than half of its registered population of approximately 1,000 still living there, it is now a typical village that suffers from a severely dwindling labour force – hence, inner-decaying, which has become the new norm in rural China. (Fig.38)

The village territory consists of one carefully planned central settlement and three much smaller natural villages, among which agricultural fields are subdivided. Over four decades, the central settlement has largely retained the spatial structure of its glory days. The highly regulated masterplan consists of two parallel sets of housing, each consisting of thirteen 50-metre long, one-storey rows, and a series of commune facilities, such as a commune hall, an open air theatre facing a square for public gatherings, and a swimming pool, forming the central axis. (Fig.39) All these spatial characteristics echo the collective aspirations of the time. According to my interviews with the village leader, Jiang Xinpu, and the then vice leader of the Shigushan Production Brigade, Jiang
Jinglian, in 2016 and 2017, local residents were forced to move into the then newly built central settlement during the commune time, abandoning their houses in nearby natural villages. When the commune system collapsed, so did the central settlement as a concentrated living quarter. Residents moved back to where they had been relocated from, their original natural villages. This further attests to the resilience of the family tradition discussed in the previous section.

The reversion to more dispersed organisation not only affected how people live but also land management. Since returning to their original homes, villagers have regained direct control over the land surrounding their settlements, although all land within the territory is formally collectively owned by the administrative village. This attributes to the implementation of the Household Contract Responsibility System in the 1980s that terminated the commune system. Though the structure of the rural territory was firmly established as collectivist, through this new land system, the state retreated from providing social and economic security to rural communities by granting each rural household a piece of contracted land within the village territory. Thus the contracted farmland and the house site are the closest equivalent to welfare provision in cities and can be seen as the last line of security for rural households. However, given the high density of the rural population, the average agricultural land allocated per household is often far from sufficient for the household to survive on. As a result, rural families have no choice but to depend on the money sent back by family members working in cities. Resulting in predominantly smallholdings in China, the household-based land system has become the institutional foundation of rural life and production.

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18. During their relocation in the 1970s, residents from the same natural village more or less resided in the same housing cluster in the central settlement.

19. Nevertheless, during my visits, I found out that a considerable number of villagers retained the memory of a collective past, mainly evidenced by the interior decoration of their houses, such as altars to Mao in the living room.

20. The population density of Fenghuang town has reached 137 people per square kilometer and the average agricultural land per household is 2,500 m².
The decline of collectivity is also evidenced by changes in the usage and provision of public facilities. Shigushan has seen its commune facilities, such as the gathering hall, the primary and secondary schools and the machinery plant, abandoned or reused as storage and places to raise livestock.\(^{21}\) The original central axis – the ‘public spine’ – of the central settlement is covered with undergrowth and has no active functions, though is still legible as a spatial channel. After the commune, apart from a few waste yards and toilets, the new service provision is a building compound that contains the village committee, located in the north-western corner slightly outside the main settlement.

Though with a clinic and a small open-air stage integrated, this new facility is primarily for the purpose of administration. During my visits to Shigushan village in 2016 and 2017, the most active space in the village is in fact around a few convenience shops,\(^{22}\) located in the intersection of the original north-south central axis and a west-east main street that is wide enough for cars to pass through. ‘This is now where residents meet, chat, play mah-jong,\(^{23}\) share casual meals and watch their kids play.’\(^{24}\) Based on my observation as well as interviews, there are rarely organised communal activities at the village level, and what is happening now in the village are spontaneous casual interactions. The transformation of public facilities and communal spaces clearly manifests the collapsed self-organisation of a village community.\(^{25}\)

On the one hand, this is a direct result from the drastic outflow of rural labour – the floating population, which makes villages largely reliant on urban economies, as discussed in Chapter 1. At a village level, it means that rural households tend to look for economic opportunities outside their village and have little interest in long-term cooperation within. This has resulted in a decline of the shared values and social norms that previously created cohesive communal identities, and seriously erodes the endogenous viability of rural society. This process of the collapsing of the village community is conceptualised by He Xuefeng as ‘the atomisation of villages’.\(^{24}\)

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21 In addition, the original supply and marketing co-operative in the commune was purchased by five brothers and sisters from the same family and converted to residential premises for their personal use.

22 These convenience stores are all run by villagers. According to my interviews with shop-owners, when the housing density in the village increased in the early 2000s, they took possession of land on the central axis (originally left open as a square) on which they built their family homes with convenience stores in the front open to the main street.

23 Mahjong is a tile-based Chinese game commonly played by four players. It is one of the most popular leisure activities in Chinese rural society.

Elderly residents gathering in the street corner outside the mah-jong room.

Younger residents playing cards under a tree on the opposite side of a convenience shop.

Parents watching kids playing in the main street between convenience shops.

A small crowd in front of a convenience shop.

Fig. 43. The Main Street with Convenience Shops on Both Sides, the Most Active Space in the Village, 2017

Shigushan Village, Fenghuang Town, Wushan District, Wuhan, Hubei Province, P.R. China

Photo: Architectural Association Wuhan Visiting School 2016-2017 (co-directed by the author)
Fig. 44 Distribution of Public Facilities, Shigushan Production Brigade, 1970s
Fenghuang People’s Commune, Wuhan, Hubei Province, P.R. China

Fig. 45 Distribution of Public Facilities, Shigushan Village, 2017
Fenghuang Town, Wuhan City, Hubei Province, P.R. China
On the other, the contemporary village governance model should be put in question. In the current governance and fiscal system, public services and general welfare within a village, for example the construction and provision of roads, schools, health care and irrigation system, are the responsibility of the village committee, both in terms of organisation and funding. Therefore, service provision relies on the financial condition of the village and the quality of the village leadership. To a great extent, the latter determines the former as the village administration is in theory in charge of generating collective incomes. In this regard, as argued by Zhang Jing, public affairs are handled through personal relationships and subject to personal political and economic interests, and the absence of respected common principles and standards thus makes village governance insufficient. However, Lily L. Tsai points out that a clear distinction between the public and private does not exist in the Chinese rural society, and the commonality is in fact embedded in all sorts of private relationships. More exactly, when different ‘solidary groups’ in the rural society such as village administration, clan and religious groups – form a system of check and balance, the informal accountability is constructed and this is what holds rural governance responsible and makes it work. But, in the current context, an atomised rural population of individual households is not a fertile ground to facilitate solidary groups, and the informal accountability is thus suspended.

To understand the root mechanism of all these issues outlined above requires an understanding of the characterisation of a village community. However, in social science this characterisation remains disputed. In Chinese social studies, the Japanese concept of kyodotai, a system of communal landholding and labour, is especially influential. This concept defines a village community as a social group with a shared collective identity, which largely resonates with the theory of ‘moral economy’ advanced by James C. Scott. Based on a study of the confrontation with capitalist developments by the traditional agrarian society of Southeast Asia, Scott concludes that maintaining the subsistence farming of the entire community is the first priority of a village collective and outweighs the interest of individual peasants. Thus, ensuring social security is the base of a village community. However, studying the same question as Scott, Samuel Popkin opposes the theory of moral economy by arguing that peasants as rational subjects tend to strengthen their own interests through competition with their fellow peasants. This observation has been in part backed up by scholars studying rural North China in the 1940s, such as Hatada Takashi and Philip C. C. Huang. Both confirm a stratification of members within a village community. Therefore, the claim that rural values of cooperation and community are unaffected by capitalism is brought into question. Having said these, whether a village community is more cooperative or competitive, or whether rural values are pre-capitalist is for this thesis less important than understanding how cooperation and competition work in a village community.

Derived from these disputes on Chinese village communities, Prasenjit Duara proposes the concept of ‘the cultural nexus of power’. This concept, as well as its theoretical framing, provides an investigative tool to dissect the complex mechanisms of village communities. Based on his studies of rural North China, Duara rejects the idea of village identity simply as ‘insular and solidary’ and instead defines the village community as ‘a functionally significant entity that coordinated several important activities’. For Duara, it is the affiliation of symbolic values to social institutions of kinship, religion, market and the like that constitutes a form of authority in networks that consist of hierarchical organisations and informal relations, hence the ‘nexus’. To explain how the cultural nexus of power works, he writes:

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25. For case studies on rural local leadership, see John Friedmann, China’s Urban-Rural Transition (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2005), 43-46.
28. Ibid. The premise underlying a solidary group’s informal accountability is that the group is: unsoapfreeing and embedding. This is to make sure the way these solidary groups are structured is aligned with the formal political administrative structure. So, these two different mechanisms can be mutually beneficial.
29. The term kyodotai can be literally translated as ‘common body’. A typical kyodotai village is a village that relies on the labour-intensive cultivation of paddy fields.
34. In terms of explaining and exposing these forces that shape the mechanism of how a social group works, Duara’s concept resonates to an extent with the concept of field put forward by Pierre Bourdieu. However, as the cultural nexus of power is more specific to the organisation of a community while field is largely devoted to understand agents’ individual actions that constitutes the social life whereas there is always a struggle for dominance among the participants, the former is conceptualised directly in reference to the context of rural China, the thesis chooses to adopt Duara’s concept here.
The cultural nexus derives its strength from its rooting of the analysis of culture and legitimacy within the organizational context in which power is exercised. The nexus was not simply the arena in which power was contested; nor was it only the framework that structured access to resources; it was also the matrix within which legitimacy and authority were produced, represented, and reproduced.35

Firmly established on forms of agricultural production, the sense of rural community is rooted in and formed by the way people work and live in the same territory and with familiar people. In other words, rural inhabitants live and work in relatively close circles both socially and spatially, with familiarity forming the basis of interpersonal trust. Duara’s concept of the cultural nexus of power clarifies the mechanism of familiarity in a village community, through which the power that governs and drives this community is produced, legitimised and made effective. To put it differently, it provides a lens for understanding and analysing the society of acquaintances advanced by Fei, as well as the solidarity groups by Tsai. It is also important to clarify that the effective realm of the cultural nexus of power is not necessarily bounded to a fixed physical territory, as Duara uses the notion of ‘territorility’ in its anthropological sense. For him, the realm of activities performed by a social group is not defined by functional needs, such as market activities, but rather by the sphere of influence and control of a given power and authority, such as that of a temple.36 In its essence, the cultural nexus of power provides a synthetic, unbiased perspective to examine formal and informal organisations, public and private relationships and material and symbolic values that are produced, contested and represented in a village community. The cultural nexus of power is thus arguably a framework of rurality.

Through this lens, a different understanding of the contemporary inner-decaying village is revealed. The spatial transformation of inner-decaying villages has seen a paradox: even though the village is depopulating, the amount of construction work is increasing. (Fig.46) For example, in the Baoshi village located in Tongshan county, Hubei province, a traditional village originally established in the Min Dynasty (fourteenth century), its changing settlement pattern clearly demonstrates a shift from a traditional nucleated organisation to an expansive


36. To relate this point back to the discussion in Chapter 1, the traditional market community can be seen as a model that spatialises one of the various constitutive layers of the cultural nexus in terms of the territorial organisation of pre-Communist Chinese rural society.
pattern along main roads connecting the village to the township centre. As a shared aspiration of rural society, building a new family home celebrates the rising socio-economic status of a household in a village. So even though rural migrant workers themselves spend little time in their home villages, they still send back a large portion of their earnings to fund the construction of new family houses. This shows that, to some extent, the village still represents home and a sense of belonging for migrant workers. Accordingly, a considerable amount of rural migrant workers return on their retirement from jobs in cities.

Their adult children then take their turn to leave the village, completing a full rural-urban migration cycle. This cyclical pattern runs through generations and reveals a cultural and social need to return to one's roots. As recent as 2012, the centuries-old Baoshi village had a new ancestral temple constructed, which was meant to not only bring prestige and honour to its family but was also to glorify its ancestors. Fig. 47 Thrus, through the village may be described as inner-decaying, villagers still have the desire to be recognised locally. These phenomena - building the family house, as well as the ancestral temple, and returning to the village – are admittedly concerned with economic necessities. But, I would argue, they are also largely, if not more fundamentally, driven by the symbolic value attached to these actions, which leads to the accumulation of cultural capital that confers social status and power. Both arbitrary and instrumental, this logic of practice in social life is deeply embedded in and shaped by the cultural nexus in a village community.

This logic also appears in and underpins contemporary rituals, which still play a crucial role in the lives of villagers. The family reunion dinner during the Spring Festival is the single-most important event of the year and brings back those who have left to work elsewhere. In a village, events like this are often held at the village hall or an ancestral temple. Fig. 48 The event itself may just be a few days, but it is when rural migrant workers and villagers reconnect, a crucial moment to reconfirm connections with their relevant social groups – to exchange information with their fellow villagers, to negotiate collaborative activities among close friends and to agree on important issues for the coming year such as the division of labour within a household. These interactions, exchanges and negotiations lay the foundation upon which power in a village community is put into action, or simply put, draw the outline through which things work. This mechanism certainly exists in the urban society, yet it plays a

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more important and fundamental role in the rural social, economic and cultural life. As exemplified by the Spring Festival, communal activities with a function to shape and reshape productive social relations are thus arguably the moment when the cultural nexus of power is made explicit and visible. Furthermore, communal activities as such and the particular spaces in which they take place are closely interrelated and mutually reinforcing, together contributing to the formation of a sense of community.

In fact, the rural cultural nexus is unnecessarily confined to the countryside. It also exists in cities in the urban village. The urban village is a spontaneous, temporary, affordable housing model that accommodates a significant number of low-income rural migrant workers. As a spatial product of two sets of contradictory situations – state ownership and collective ownership of land, and restricted labour mobility and a liberalised labour market – urban villages are illegally built by local residents who collectively own the land, which is often on the urban fringe. In terms of how social interactions occur and how interpersonal trust is established, the lifestyles and social relations in urban villages are largely rural. More specifically, rural migrant workers from the same village or region tend to gather when coming to cities, which reveals a different social relationship compared to normative social ties in cities. The kinship relation and geographic relation, the two most fundamental relations that form rural communities, thus also exist in cities. The urban village reveals a strong will of rural migrant workers to engage in urban economies but also to maintain a rural form of life. Therefore, the urban village is a rural enclave in the city and reveals a form of the cultural nexus of power beyond the sphere of the countryside.

The cultural nexus of power is not just historical but also contemporary. When social and economic conditions change in the countryside, the cultural nexus of power engages new forces and takes on a different form. It is therefore an important theoretical tool to decode rurality and to rethink rural regeneration from within. Within this framework, what is identified above are the formal mechanism – the household-based land system – and the informal mechanism – the logic of practice underpinned by the symbolic value – in a village community. Thus, based on the understanding that the agency of spatial design lies in the restructuring of social relationships, to see a village community as a spatial question is to ask: How to crystallise and thus instrumentalise the cultural nexus in its contemporary form? Specifically, how to capture, emphasise and enable certain intangible moments in the interplay between formal and informal mechanisms in a village community through legible and concrete spaces, that is, through the overall spatial organisation of a village settlement and the provision and distribution of public facilities that frame instrumental communal activities, in order to make these two mechanisms compatible and mutually reinforcing?
The national programme Building a New Socialist Countryside has inner-decaying villages strongly in its sight. Planners and architects have been increasingly mobilised to participate. The award-winning planning project for a new village community in Zhaishan village, located in a suburban district of Wuhan, exemplifies the thousands of proposals for new rural settlements that have sprung up in the past decade. As a typical strategy to urbanise a suburban village in close proximity to an urban centre, this project accommodates a relocated population of roughly 12,000 from 8 nearby villages, all of which are going to be demolished.

The primary objectives, as stated in the planning document, are to free up rural land for industrial development and to transform farmers into urban citizens, which closely follows the ‘three concentrations’ strategy discussed in Chapter 1. The former objective is pursued through the introduction of land use zoning plans. Augmented by a phasing scheme, the distribution of three functional zones—a residential zone to accommodate

39. The planning project was proposed by the Wuhan Modern Urban Agriculture Planning Design Institute (UAPDI) and won the Gold Medal at the Planning in the National Habitat Design Competition 2013, awarded by the Architectural Society of China. The project location is Zhaishan village, Wuchang district, Wuhan, Hubei province, P. R. China.
40. Zhaishan village is within a one-hour driving distance of the city centre of Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei province, and two kilometres away from the local district centre.
42. According to the proposal, the new concentrated settlement will occupy just 76.45 hectares out of the total 266.7 hectares gained from the demolition of the old villages. Thus, a large amount of land will be freed up, of which a portion of 36.56 hectares will be allocated for industrial use and the rest for future development.
relocated villagers, a logistical industrial zone and a cultural and tourist zone – reveals how planners and government officials tackle the pressing rural problems of developing local economies and increasing local employment opportunities through spatial planning. Furthermore, in addition to outlining a ‘three-year hukou transition scheme’ for relocated villagers in the planning document, the spatial organisation of this new village community and the provision of public facilities is intended to achieve the latter objective.

Reviewing the proposed Zhaishan masterplan, the perimeter block dominates the overall spatial organisation. (Fig. 50) Divided by six to eight-lane roads, each block accommodates a cluster of high-rise housing in the centre, and streets with shops and communal facilities defining the perimeter. The areas in-between are carefully landscaped to create a garden-like environment. Apart from representing the spectacle of an urban lifestyle, the introduction of apartment blocks completely eliminates subsistence agriculture. With villagers having no choice but to work for large agribusiness firms, the state consolidates rural land and industrialises agriculture. In this regard, the promise of gaining permanent, legal status as an urban citizen, as well as the aspiration of urban lifestyle, is deliberately attached to the design of new village communities. When exchanging their contracted farmland for a unit in the new residential towers, villagers have real estate that is largely non-productive, except in the rare cases in which land value sharply increases. More importantly, it is the contracted land use right that gives villagers the right to participate in collective farming, to have an impact on community decision-making and to share responsibilities within a community, and this therefore defines the status within a village community. To expropriate the right to their land from villagers fundamentally undermines this, and thus reconstructs the formal mechanism in the cultural nexus of power.

In the Zhaishan proposal, what is less obvious but not less significant is the issue of the unit population of each block. This ranges from approximately 1,000 to 2,000 people, or 300-500 households, which closely resembles the composition of the original villages from which rural residents are relocated. The perimeter block replaces yet also mimics the administrative scale of a village as a basic spatial unit to manage rural populations. To an extent, keeping a similar unit population indicates the intention to keep the village together as a governing unit. Yet, the idea of a village community and how it works is to be changed significantly. Contrary to the functioning of each village as a relatively independent community, the Zhaishan masterplan proposes the creation of ten residential perimeter blocks to form one big, concentrated community,
which integrates formerly dispersed communities and the distribution of public facilities. Communal services are now shared by a community of approximately 14,000 residents and 3,500 households. This no longer facilitates the intimate scale of social interactions within a village, which undermines the informal relations in the cultural nexus of power.

As the original mechanisms are dismantled, what would be a new form of power able to re-territorialise village communities? The communal facility plan shows that services are equally distributed and accessible in each perimeter block, which seemingly reduces the impact of a sudden shift in socio-spatial scale. A closer look at the actual programmes, however, disproves this. The facilities that manage and serve the entire community, including a village committee, a property management committee, two kindergartens, a rest home, three clinics, a sports hall and two multi-functional rooms, are only distributed across four blocks and are further concentrated in only two of them. In fact, the only communal service that every block provides is commerce. Therefore, in terms of service provision for the new village community, commercial facilities are clearly conceived as the most important. Community is thus above anything else defined by consumption.

This message is vividly conveyed by the key rendering of the new Zhaishan village community proposal: A commercial street with an artificial canal in the middle and two- or three-storey shops on both sides with high-rise apartments in the background. It is not without irony that brand names such as Louis Vuitton and Giorgio Armani can be seen on the street facade in the foreground. A series of small landscape bridges and one gallery bridge across the canal further enhance the image of high-end leisure shopping. The fact that this commercial street is named ‘The Central Cultural Street’ is very telling. Throughout the planning document, the term ‘culture’ or ‘Zhaishan culture’ is frequently used – for example Zhaishan culture street or Zhaishan culture square – yet without a clear definition of what the term means. The image, however, clearly conveys the message of what contemporary rural culture should be according to planners and local government officials. Apart from the strong emphasis on consumerism, the building style – mainly Modernist but with a touch of traditional Chinese architecture – is another ironic yet revealing feature. The main entrances to the shopping areas adopt the form of a traditional Chinese theatre stage, which are directly borrowed and simply glued to facades made of concrete frames and large glazed panels. Residential high-rises are topped by a traditional pitched roof style, and similar stylistic borrowing is applied to the landscape design. This superficial embrace of
traditional features is perhaps a gesture to soften the drastic change in lifestyle suggested by the proposal.

The ultimate message in this project is a fundamental disjunction between the system of values and the socio-economic structures, through which rural culture are reconstructed and rural mentality reshaped. Moreover, the fact that this planning project won the highest award in a national competition held by the Architectural Society of China suggests that this social and cultural reconstruction is approved and appreciated by the national authorities in architecture and planning, and therefore the state. It is evident that, compared to the two historical models of rural communities discussed, the current Building a New Socialist Countryside promotes neither the patricidal clan authority nor state power, but consumerism to establish new aspiration, values and social norms in rural communities and to thus radically reshape the cultural nexus of power. In this regard, constructing a rural consumer class has become both a means and an end for the state to confront significant social changes in today's rural society, thereby re-territorialising the countryside.

There are realised cases of new village communities that have embraced the same idea, for example new Madu village community. Madu village is another showcase model located in close proximity to the city centre of a provincial capital, and has a very similar geographic location to Zhaishan village. Just like the Zhaishan proposal, the proposed masterplan for new Madu village community features a main commercial street running across the entire village, with commercial or leisure activities implied as communal. However, six years after its regeneration in the late 2000s, while its residential blocks are all in full use, none of the main commercial street has been realised. Even the newly built communal hall in Madu village remains largely unused. This reveals the contradiction between the imposed meaning and means of being communal in rural society and the socio-cultural reality of rural communities.

Fig.53 The Proposed Masterplan for New Madu Village Community Overlaid onto the Existing Condition in 2002 v.s. The Completed New Madu Village Community in 2010
Zhengzhou, Henan Province, P.R. China
On the economic side, the new Madu village community saw an increase of 9% in household income by 2014, which to an extent proves the success of the economic model of employing regulated crop farming and integrating non-agricultural activities. However, a study of the occupation structure of Madu village shows that the population engaged in crop farming has actually decreased to one third, whereas the number of migrant workers has almost doubled. This changing occupation structure reveals that in the regeneration process a considerable number of landless villagers have been driven to seek employments in cities. Thus, the economic success of the regenerated village is coupled with an exacerbated rural-to-urban migration. Seemingly ironic, it attests the effect of this type of village community reconstruction in uprooting the rural population.

In fact, this very model for rural regeneration is not newly invented but rather adopted from the predominant residential model in Chinese cities, the xiangze (small district). To fully understand how the xiangze model will transform rural communities requires an understanding of its working in cities and its role in a recent shift in Chinese governmentality. Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the danwei (work unit) model became the state-run all-inclusive modular unit for Chinese cities, which assigned living, work and communal services to the urban population, encompassing social organisation and economic development. It is therefore the equivalent of the rural people’s commune in China’s urban history. Coinciding with the shift from a socialist planned economy to a market-oriented economy in the early 1980s, Chinese

45. Coinciding with its regeneration process, the new Madu village community established a collective enterprise as its governing and operating body, jointly founded by the village committee and a private agribusiness firm. This enterprise manages a variety of cash crops over approximately 330 hectares of integrated farmland and employs 430 villagers. Elements of agritourism and the rental of village houses are also part of the collective business plan.

46. Tu J (top) and others, “Xiangze: Hui and Mianzhu Shehui Zhanzhang he Shiyanggang Yanju—Yi Zhengzhou de Jinhui Qu Madu cun well” (Study of Rural Village and its Commune in Zhengzhou City) (Shiyingxing Zhuanhuan he Shequ Yichao, 2009, pp. 293-294).

47. Low-skilled villagers are likely to become the new urban poor as the nature of manual labour employment mean that their time living in cities will be short term and unsustainable.

48. “Governmentality” was first coined by Michel Foucault and used to examine the way in which the government exercises control over and governs the wealth, health and happiness of its people. See Michel Foucault, Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977-78, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005).

49. In a danwei, and normally within a walled compound, communal facilities were provided by a company or factory and included canteens, public bathhouses, kindergartens, health clinics and an assembly hall for gatherings by staff workers. In this light, a danwei was an autonomous, enclosed compound through which urbanisation expanded homogeneously. Essentially built on work relationships, both employment and housing provision ensured danwei-based urban development.
Cities have seen the danwei dismantled and consequentially replaced by the xiaoqu model. The separation between workplace and living areas, resulting from the demise of the danwei system and the privatisation and commodification of housing, enabled by the urban land reform, have facilitated the rise of the xiaoqu, which, in its most basic sense, is a residential housing estate with communal facilities, such as convenience stores, kindergartens, clinics, or sports facilities. The xiaoqu model relieved the state from the ‘heavy burden’ of service provisions for urban residents through collaborating with the private sector. In other words, the transformation from danwei to xiaoqu marks a shift in population management, one that actively engages a real estate model and inherits the characteristic of public service provision from its previous model. If the danwei was an instrument to produce proletarians, the xiaoqu is devised to produce self-reflective modern citizens and to thus re-territorialise China’s urban structure during a turbulent process of nationwide economic transformations since the early 1980s. In this regard, the disjunction from a collective to a modern lifestyle first occurred in the urban.

It is fairly common to compare the xiaoqu model to experiences and observations from the gated community. As an urban development model, the xiaoqu relies on market speculation, facilitating urban sprawl and fragmentation. Yet, it is important to note that the xiaoqu model has introduced a diversity of housing typologies with their related new forms of social identity and social stratification. With China’s path to urbanisation a complex mix of neoliberal and socialist approaches, the role of the xiaoqu in urban governance remains often overlooked.

The xiaoqu model resonates in part with the concept of ‘government through community’, advanced by Nicholas Rose in 1999. This concept identifies the community not simply as a social unit within civil society but as a deliberate tool of governance within a neoliberal policy framework. But China’s shift in governmentality should also be understood through its socialist history. ‘Community-Building’ (shequ jianshe), a national programme propounded by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the PRC in 1991, has regulated China’s urban populations after the decline of the danwei system. Though still maintaining its meaning as a social unit, the concept of community (shequ) has been specifically redefined to play the role of the lowest political and administrative unit of

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China's urban society. Every community is governed by a community residents' committee, which includes a local branch of the Communist Party as an integral component. More specifically, collaborating with property management companies from the private sector, the community residents' committee carries out a range of key governmental functions: 1. security and mediation; 2. welfare and service; 3. population and family planning; 4. environment and sanitation; 5. culture and education; and 6. supervision and liaison. Covering almost all aspects of daily affairs, the committee is the terminal of social services and welfare based on a face-to-face relationship with the residents within a xiaogu. Meanwhile, evidenced by the provision of cultural and educational activities that promote party propaganda, it is also undoubtedly a political instrument of the central government to bring the party to the people. Therefore, although the committee is officially defined as a grassroots organisation for self-governance by residents, the state has never truly retreated from communities. Rather, the role of the state has shifted from direct government (as in a danwei) to governance (as in a community). Of particular significance is the scale of a community's jurisdiction, which has gradually aligned with the spatial scale of a xiaogu. In this respect, the xiaogu model, the basic spatial unit of contemporary urban China, has merged with the smallest political and administrative unit of urban governance.

These governmental functions are embodied in the spatial organisation of a xiaogu. For example, in the Baibuting xiaogu, a pilot site for ‘Community Building’ in Wuhan, the systematic arrangement of different scales of spatial units – housing cluster, unit building (danyuan) and individual housing unit – further divides the overall population of a xiaogu into smaller, manageable groups. A system of security and policing, for example monitoring the coming and going of residents and visitors, is carried out at access points to these spatial units in addition to the main gates of the walled xiaogu compound. Apart from the tangible surveillance system, regularised public space creates a realm that is transparent and open enough for residents to monitor others as well as themselves to ensure they obey the accepted norms of social behaviours. Important nodal points in the public space also become the pathway for public dissemination; for example, bulletin boards can often be found displaying a

51 The community residents' committee was transformed from the original residents' committee first introduced in 1954. This transformation has seen the scale of a committee’s governing population as well as its territory expand.
52 For example, in the 2004 Beijing Planning document, increasing the alignment between community and xiaogu was included as a key principle.
correlation of the spatial, social and administrative units that emerges through a reconfiguration of communities and their spatial forms. Though seemingly mundane and to an extent liberal, the xiangju-based template is in fact the actualisation of a form of diffuse, inward power that mobilises the population towards modern citizenship and to enact a newly-imposed governance model through everyday life. In the rural context, what this fixed spatial and administrative urban template does not allow for is the cultural nexus of power, a complex interrelationship between formal and informal organisations in rural communities. To put it differently, the urban template destroys constitutive channels in the cultural nexus of village communities without creating new ones that truly respond to the changing needs of local communities. With a rural population of around 900 million, the assimilation and regularisation of rural communities would lead to a radical alteration in the entire socio-cultural system in China. The spatial form of a community is arguably one of the essential forms that embody and manifest systems of culture and values in a society. Therefore, to take the cultural nexus in village communities as a spatial question is not only to problematise how China's governmentality has been spatialised, but also of great importance and urgency in socio-cultural terms.

Given that through the xiangju model urban community building is used as a managerial tool of governance in cities, when this model comes to the countryside, is this also to apply to rural community? To compare the previous Zhai shan case study with a typical xiangju, the proposed population of the entire new settlement and that of each perimeter block fall into the standard range of an overall xiangju and one of its housing cluster. This means the population management in this new village community matches the standards established in the Code for Urban Residential Areas Planning and Design. First implemented in 1994, this design standard established a three-level scheme to regulate the organisation of urban housing, which consists of, from larger to smaller, the residential area, the xiangju and the housing cluster. In rural areas, there is also a basic three-level spatial structure in place: the town/township, the administrative village and the natural village. What is happening now in rural areas is that, through village demolition and population relocation, the spatial and social scale at the bottom two levels of the rural system are being enlarged and concentrated to match their urban counterparts. In this light, adopting the xiangju model in the on-going rural regeneration is to impose an urban governance model, particularly at the scale of community. In other words, to bring the xiangju to the countryside is to bring Community Building to rural society, which will reorganise social structures and re-territorialise populations.

Derived from the nationwide collectivisation of society in the Mao era, from rural people's commune to urban danwei to the xiangju then to the current model of new village communities, a modern structure of community-based development in both rural and urban China has come full circle. Governmentality of the Chinese state then can be understood by analysing the range of items from recent policies from the state to moral guidelines endorsed by authorities to communal activities for residents. In this way, the residents of a xiangju are being trained to be well-behaved and self-reflective. Therefore, the spatial organisation of a xiangju facilitates and spatialises the governing and policing of the everyday life of urban residents in China.

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54. This tendency is implicitly evidenced by the increasing usage of the term ‘new village community’ in various planning proposals.

55. China’s rural population by registration reached around 900 million in 2012, including 650 million rural residents and a floating population of 245 million. Ironically, when the central as well as local governments announce the urbanisation rate, they always include the floating population as urban residents. Based on this mode of calculation, China’s urbanisation rate was 53.73% at the end of 2013. If calculated by household registration, the figure was 36%.
Contemporary Chinese village communities are in an extremely vulnerable situation. While strong external state force has been withdrawn from direct management of rural populations, a viable internal community-level organisation has yet to be formed. The urban template for rural regeneration is underpinned by the perception that rurality is culturally and intellectually underdeveloped, conservative, backward and thus worthless. This perception is instilled in the rural population by reconfiguring the space they live in, that is, the village settlement, through which the subordinate position of village communities in various fields, such as economics, politics and culture, is reinforced. More exactly, when the xiaoqu template is applied in the rural, apart from implementing the national strategy of concentration and introducing the urban governance model, it exercises an act of symbolic violence, in which rural residents are both victims and conspirators. By accepting and practicing instilled values and rules, rural residents become instruments of their own subordination, which makes symbolic violence influential without the need for visible acts of coercion, and thus extremely powerful. Therefore, when confronting this situation, village communities are defenceless and entirely subject to the values and rules defined by the field of power. In this context, revisiting rurality is of great importance, not to romanticise rural communities and advocate for a return to the past, but to seek opportunities for transformation derived from the socio-spatial context of historical and current rural societies: the cultural nexus of power. A village community project is thus social, cultural and political.

A viable contemporary village community requires the cultural nexus and the bond between the place and inhabitants be recreated and regenerated. The existing formal institution, the land system, and informal relations based on the intimate social scale are interrelated and formative for a village community. For rurality to fully adapt to the contemporary situation, there is one more question to ask: what new driving forces can be introduced in order to transcend a purely agricultural community and create one based on diversified activities attractive to a mixed population; in other words, what new driving forces can be introduced to construct new channels in the cultural nexus of power in contemporary rural society?

Interestingly, coinciding with the prevalence of the urban template for new village communities, a self-proclaimed attempt to cherish rural culture, specifically, agritourism, is emerging as a way to bring new activities to the countryside. Villages have seen agritourism increasingly integrated with rural developments to capitalise on the cultural idea of the countryside as the embodiment of a harmonious relationship between nature and people. Since 2016, the Wuhan Agricultural Bureau has been promoting the Guiding Tourist Map of Beautiful Countryside in Wuhan, which identifies 8 agritourist zones and 74 pilot agritourist villages in the municipality. For example, responding to the boom in agritourism, the Xiaozhuwan natural village located in the Jianxian district within a one-hour drive of central Wuhan, has been transformed into a site for photographers and is a widely praised example of agritourism. Based on the key concept of ‘managing a village’, the project architects designed an economy based on countryside photography in order to restore the village’s ability to self-organise, and renovated most village houses, infrastructure and landscape. However, when I visited Xiaozhuwan in 2016, less than one year

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56 Here I refer to ‘field’ as defined by Pierre Bourdieu. In Bourdieu’s definition, field is a system of forces and social relations where the constant struggle between the dominant and the dominated takes place. For Bourdieu’s first introduction of this concept, see Pierre Bourdieu, "Intellectual Field and Creative Project," Information (International Social Science Council) 6, no. 2 (1 April 1969): 86-110.

57 ‘Symbolic violence’ is defined by Pierre Bourdieu as a form of violence operating symbolically. As Bourdieu writes, ‘it requires of the person who undergoes it an attitude which defies the ordinary alternative between freedom and constraint’. For example, gender inequality and class relations are typical examples of symbolic violence. See Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 185.
after its renovation was completed, the village looked brand new but was deserted and the large number of family-run restaurants were virtually empty. The numerous photographs mounted on newly-renovated building facades and display boards had already started to fade, indicating a passing fad. (Fig.57)

Despite all its good intentions, time has proven that this intervention in local economic activities was far removed from the way of life of the villagers and thus was ultimately not successful nor sustainable. Intended to boost local economies and create more rural employment opportunities, agritourism, or agritourism, is promoted by private developers and welcomed by local governments. Agritourism is justified as a product of the cultural economy, something derived from a territorial identity based on cultural resources, and thus it is meant to produce ‘higher status’ jobs. Accordingly, the participation of villagers is presumed and considered a new social norm. In turn, actual agricultural producers are marginalised. Moreover, the consumer perspective hinges on ‘authenticity’. As a result, ironically, in order to satisfy the desire for either a sense of nostalgia or a retreat from urban life, this type of development tends to reinforce what is deemed authentic about the countryside and thus fetishizes the rural. This is not only a distortion of rural identity, but also produces and enhances the stereotype of nature, one that relies on a false, static depiction of the countryside and rural life. Reconstructed authenticity will result in changes to villagers’ everyday lives, their values and their subjectivity, and will thus lead to cultural erosion in the long term.

However, do the problems presented by agitourism mean no alternative activities apart from farming can be rooted in rural life? Not at all. The Rural Studio, an off-campus design-build programme by Auburn University was established in Hale County, Alabama, in the United States in 1993 and has engaged with community-oriented construction work ever since. After over more than two decades working on projects in three local counties, this education programme has become a driving force behind and an important part of local community developments, both socially and spatially. While the teaching staff and students benefit from collaborating with locals and learning from local know-how, the local participants gain a different social identity through these collaborations. In addition, the rural lifestyle has been integrated into the learning process, which is one of the main goals of the Rural Studio. For example, in order for the programme to be self-sufficient in its food supply, students are required to learn how to grow vegetables and even prepare soil prior to cultivation. In this sense, the Rural Studio can be seen as a cultural project, exemplifying how education, something conventionally considered to be a
predominantly urban activity, can be embedded into the daily fabric of rural life and can be inclusive and mutually beneficial.

The Rural Studio is not the only example of a rural educational programme. The Trans-Rural Lab based in Caulnes, France, brings together the cross-disciplinary schools of architecture, art and agriculture as well as local skills and knowledge to develop long-term alternative uses and functions for agricultural operations in dire circumstances. The goal is to create models of subsistent architecture and agriculture rather than those of commodity food production. Recently, this type of rural education institution has started to emerge in China. The Turenscape Academy was established in 2015 in Xixinan village, Anhui province. Founded by Dr Yu Kongjian, a prominent figure in landscape architecture in China, this new academy aims to advance design education through actively engaging with its rural setting. However, the impact on locals and the potential transformations the Turenscape Academy may bring to its host village is yet to be seen. Nevertheless, the emergence of the Turenscape Academy testifies to the feasibility and interest in a rural education model in China. The advancement of the internet and improvement of physical infrastructure has made it possible and affordable for rural sites being well-enough connected to the rest of the world. This lays the foundation for the introduction of the knowledge economy and creative industries to a rural setting. In fact, both the Rural Studio and the Turenscape Academy consider ‘being international’ a crucial feature to overcome the limitations associated with functioning in a rural location. These institutions reflect the principle strategy of the network at the territorial scale, which is to facilitate the bypassing of the hierarchical urban system.

The examples discussed above concern education institutions taking the initiative to establish themselves in rural areas. Another example, in Ireland, a country where the agro-pastoral economy still plays an important role, shows that the reverse is also possible: the rural community can take it upon itself to introduce educational programmes and collaborative events. For example, I took part in a public weekend event at Hooke Park in 2016, in which volunteers from the AA school as well as local communities worked together planting and trimming trees in the local woods. In addition, several caretakers of this rural campus have become tutors in the school. Thus, their social role has been transformed. However, compared with the other examples discussed, Hooke Park Campus is geographically more isolated. Therefore, its interaction with local communities is not on a day-to-day basis and is more events-based.

The Hooke Park Campus of the Architectural Association (AA) in the U.K. is another relevant example. For more than 30 years, while hosting a master’s programme and short visitors’ workshops, this woodland site has been recognised as an important part of the local community of West Dorset through its introduction of public programmes and collaborative events. For example, I took part in a public weekend event at Hooke Park in 2015, in which volunteers from the AA school as well as local communities worked together planting and trimming trees in the local woods. In addition, several caretakers of this rural campus have become tutors in the school. Thus, their social role has been transformed. However, compared with the other examples discussed, Hooke Park Campus is geographically more isolated. Therefore, its interaction with local communities is not on a day-to-day basis and is more events-based.

Compared with a series of one-off events, as was the case in Xiaozhuwan village, an effective local initiative to diversify local activities should be embedded in the community as an institution and a process. This needs to be nurtured through partnerships and alliances and must draw on multi-disciplinary inputs. To this end, the idea of education institutions in rural areas can be redefined in a broader sense. Educational programmes should form a mechanism in the community that can have a pedagogical impact on inhabitants, ranging from skills training and lifelong learning for villagers to communal activities that facilitate community participation and communal decision-making. In this light, this project proposes a contemporary cultural nexus of power that is formed by and productive of a reciprocal model of social learning among mixed populations and through diversified activities. Knowledge is a means of production and the rural population has been long deprived access to it. Transmitting new knowledge to rural society through everyday practices, as well as reviving indigenous knowledge, is a way to help rural communities fight against the dominance of the current orthodox culture determined by sets of
The proposed public facilities in the idea of framing include...
form an effective domain where regular interactions and communications can take place. In short, the road network creates a spatial reality that has an impact on the social life of a community. Furthermore, as the ring road is a tangible but also penetrable frame for the village, it creates a clear sense of legibility and orientation, manifesting the very existence of the community. To an extent, the idea of a definable boundary resonates with the traditional character of city-making in China since ancient times and also the enclosed manner of spatial organisation of the danwei and xiaoqu. In contrast, however, what is framed inside is, instead of an urban agglomeration, a territory consisting of dispersed small settlements and public facilities punctuating farmland. In this sense, through the frame, the village territory reverses the conventional meaning of a centre by recognising farmland as a fundamental element of rural infrastructure. Moreover, this spatial organisation, a framed void, provides an opportunity to reflect on the traditional idea of the countryside as representing the harmonious oneness of existence (tianren heyi) and to transcend this idea by acknowledging that lively production and constant development are aspects of the beauty of nature.

The spatial frame outlined above lays the foundation for public facilities to enter the space as catalysts for the social life of a community. These facilities should address various mechanisms in a village community, ranging from formal administration through the village committee compound to local clan groups through ancestral temples and graveyards, from communal events through markets and workshops to daily interactions through dining areas, from co-operative production through factories and machinery plants to household-based production through water points for farming, and from adult education through vocational training schools to primary education through kindergartens and primary schools. When planning the provision and distribution of new facilities, the existing facilities of a village need to be taken into consideration. In terms of education institutions specifically, cheap land prices and rich natural resources may encourage city universities to set up research centres in rural areas in collaboration with local production bodies. Low costs, a rich natural environment and the job opportunities provided by research centres could lead to a potential influx of people from cities. This kind of influx could be temporary, seasonal or permanent. In this way, local populations and their social life can be diversified. Nonetheless, facilities and communal activities are not categorised in definite terms, but rather are encouraged to interact with one another. For example, a craft class hosted in a workshop that brings together locals, professionals and visitors can be seen as a mix of educational, cultural and economic activities. From a different perspective, even the act of travelling on the ring road between settlements and facilities, the most mundane daily activity, could intensify the experience of a village territory through the presence of the framed void and thus have an impact on the cognitive process of understanding the meaning of the rural as well as a rural form of life. In this sense, the proposed spatial frame, a road network augmented by dispersed public facilities, facilitates social learning in a village community and is itself a means of social learning. Eventually, by learning and working together, productive channels in the cultural nexus can be created or restored, and a village community revived.

The project of framing proposes an elastic form of spatial organisation for a village community in relation to the mechanisms embedded in its cultural nexus of power. It provides a framework through which formal organisations and informal relations in rural communities are made compatible and mutually reinforcing, and thus gives a form to the village community that is derived from its own roots. Furthermore, by conceptualising the village community as a model of social learning, this project stands in direct opposition to the prevailing perception of the countryside as the city’s backyard. The meaning of a community, as well as a sense of belonging, is ultimately constructed and manifested by activities carried out by the inhabitants within a legible spatial realm: the village settlement. In turn, the spatial form of a village community transforms its cultural nexus into a collective as well as individual subconscious, and in this way facilitates the conscious production of rural culture.
Shigushan village is chosen as the intervention site to test the project of framing. As previously discussed in section 2, Shigushan village, located in Fenghuang town, Xinzhou district, Wuhan, features a dwindling population typical of an inner-decaying village and a commune legacy in social and spatial terms. In terms of education, a survey of rural migrant workers in Wuhan city suggests that better education opportunities for their children is the key factor that drives rural families to move to cities.63 In this context, of particular interest is that education is one of Wuhan’s mainstay industries, as evidenced by the establishment of a total of 69 universities and colleges in the city. Given the land shortage and high prices of the central districts in the city, new developments for universities and colleges are already springing up on the outskirts of the city. Thus, there is real potential in exploring how to bring the knowledge economy to the rural, an endeavour that would meet the needs of both sides.

In Shigushan village, the new road network is proposed based on an evaluation of existing roads. As a result of this evaluation, the majority of the new road network consists of upgraded existing roads and limited new connections are made. The ring road integrates the existing link to the national road G318, currently the village’s most important channel to the outside world, which touches the east-south corner of the village territory. Similarly, the strategy for public facilities includes integrating existing facilities that are in good condition and in use, such as the village committee compound and an ancestral temple built in the 2000s, regenerating abandoned facilities that still have socio-cultural or practical value, for example, the commune gathering hall, the commune machinery plant and the commune primary and secondary school, and proposing new facilities, such as a local market located along the road entering the village, a research centre looking out onto farmland, several workshops along the ring road in-between natural villages and a series of water points scattered in the field.

Regarding the design of public facilities, the idea of framing is also applied. For the regenerated school compound, a linear spatial form is used to connect rather loosely situated old primary and secondary school buildings and to accommodate new programmes on the both ends of this compound: one nursery for child care and one vocational training school for adults. Integrating these elements into one spatial frame takes the form of a rural model that consists of pavilions connected by walkways, through which the distinction between the new and the old as well as inside and outside tends to dissolve. Following the same idea, the new workshop consists of four linear pavilions surrounding a central yard and accommodates activities that require both inside and outside spaces. For example, Shigushan village has rich resources of stone and stone masons, which explains the village’s name as shi means stone. The workshop will be a good working and teaching space for the village’s master stonemason, Lin Wangxi, who currently has ten apprentices working under him, to transmit his knowledge and skills to a wider audience.

Surrounding Settlement
Road
Administrative Village Boundary

Surrounding Settlement
Road
Administrative Village Boundary

Admin: One Central Settlement and 4 Natural Villages
Population: 1,046 / 266 households (40% of the residents are still living there)
Area: 1.9 km²
Agr. Land: 0.56 km²  Paddy Field: 0.33 km²  Woodland: 0.53 km²

Fenghuang Town, Xinzhou District, Wuhan, Hubei Province, P.R. China
The Proposed Spatial Framing System (without context) - Shigushan Village

A Toolkit of Public Facilities - Shigushan Village
Shigushan village with the proposed road network, public facilities and housing, as well as a mix of smallholdings and mechanised farming.
Public facilities along the ring road:
the regenerated commune school compound and a newly-installed workshop
Chap.3

The Dissolved Household
Organising Home Rebellion
The contemporary, ordinary self-built rural family house is the stage for the everyday life of China’s large rural population and the most typical element of the rural landscape. Yet, it has received little attention in the field of architecture and is often regarded as valueless in terms of its culture, aesthetics and design thinking as well as building techniques. However, I argue that these mundane, plain family houses are neither worthless nor a modern invention, but in fact are informed by historical knowledge of and practices in rural dwelling as well as the changing idea of family. It is these houses that embody contemporary rurality at a household level. In this regard, an understanding of the historical precedents of rural dwellings and forms of family in China is essential to disclose the process of formation and transformation in the rural. To this end, three distinct rural dwelling models are identified: the traditional courtyard house, the *tulou* (earthen building) and the people’s commune housing. Through a close reading of the spatial composition of these models in relation to their respective socio-cultural contexts, the relationships between the composition of domestic space, household management and the idea of family can be understood.

The family is a complex, ambiguous concept in traditional Chinese society. *Erya*, the oldest surviving Chinese dictionary dating back to the 3rd century BC, dedicates its fourth chapter, ‘*Shiqin*’ (Explaining Relatives), to document more
than one hundred rubrics describing family relations, such as ‘paternal clan’, ‘maternal relatives’, ‘wife’s relatives’ and ‘marriage’. Fig.58 This gives a glimpse of the sophisticated system of various social groups and institutions derived from traditional kinship relations in China. An extended family consisting of several family branches living together is widely regarded as the traditional norm. However, John King Fairbank pointed out that this type of family and mode of living were only an ideal for the privileged few and the norm of peasant family was limited to four to six members due to the scarcity of land, disease and famine.3 Based on Fairbank’s point on the small family and augmented by a historical household registration systems in China, some scholars, such as Xu Yong and Chen Ming, argued that it is a small household not the family that was the basic unit of traditional Chinese society:4 China’s historical household registration systems are important in understanding the construct of family in terms of taxation and state governance. However, the idea of family cannot be reduced to an institutional device. A lack of insight into the concrete relationships between household and traditional family calls into question the argument that the small household was the basic social unit of traditional Chinese society, as it seems to use modern concepts, such as the nuclear family, to explain traditional questions. In fact, regarding the relationship between traditional and modern concepts of family, Fei Xiatong explained clearly: ‘The lineage structure includes the household. […] in a lineage, the nuclear family is only one ring in a structure of concentric social circles. We cannot say that the nuclear family household does not exist, but we should never think of it as an independent unit, as an organisation unto itself.’5 Acknowledging the great differences in family size, Fei further argued that, even for a family of only a few members, it still shares the same structural principle – ‘the patrilineal pattern of differential relationships’ – as a lineage (sizhi).6 At the core of a traditional Chinese family is continuity, a characteristic deriving from the need to fulfill a much wider range of functions than reproduction, including economic, social, political and religious aspects. ‘Thus, Fei suggested that the basic unit of traditional Chinese society should be described as a ’small lineage’ – a single lineage social group – instead of the extended family.’7 What makes this idea of lineage instrumental is that it essentially refers to a way to organise activities, with its mechanism relying on the same inherent structural characteristic regardless of family size. This understanding provides a specific lens and lays the foundation for the following discussion to dissect the ambiguous concept of traditional Chinese family and to discuss its multi-scalar organisation.

In the most basic sense and at the smallest scale, a small lineage is a basic production unit in traditional Chinese society. On the one hand, the economic unity of a small lineage was formed and reinforced by all members constituting a united labour force working on the same land for subsistence, as well as sometimes for land rent and tax; on the other, the sense of kin was based on shared reproduction and ancestor worship. In each lineage as an independent economic unit of traditional agrarian society, the balance between production and consumption was closely related to the size and composition of the lineage and the area of available land.8 Since the land was a scarce and controlled resource at the time, this balance was normally achieved by adjusting the size of the labour force, and thus the size and composition of the lineage. When in need of more labour, a lineage would expand by incorporating distant relatives,9 or through various forms of marriage and adoption, such as that of a ‘little daughter-in-law’.10 When there was surplus labour, some members would seek temporary, seasonal or even long-term jobs in agricultural and merchant sectors elsewhere.11 In this way, in the traditional Chinese society, as activities are organised by the family, its size and composition changes accordingly.12 In other

5 Ibid, 84.
6 Ibid, 83.
7 This argument is made based on A. V. Chayanov’s theory of peasant economy. Chayanov explained that the organisation and intensity of cultivation depend on land area, use of the labouring family and its specific demands. Therefore, he argues that population density and forms of land utilisation are two fundamental factors in determining the economic system. See A. V. Chayanov, The Theory of Peasant Economy, ed. Donald Throop, Bemidji State and R. E. F. Smith (Normwood, Brixol: Richard D. Irwin, Inc. 1948), 12.
words, to adjust the size and composition of a lineage is an essential tactic to cope with changing needs of family production and reproduction over time.

It has been often argued that the traditional Chinese courtyard house, as an archetype of dwellings, temples, palaces and even the entire city, can vary a great deal in function and size, but in general follows one organisational principle. To examine this more closely, it is necessary to focus on the courtyard house as a dwelling type in relation to the family structure and household management. In this regard, the first question is: What was the relationship between the structure of lineage and the organisational principle of the traditional Chinese courtyard house?

As a dwelling type, a traditional Chinese courtyard house is a compound made up of one or more courtyards connected in a serial and/or parallel manner. Each courtyard unit is made up of rooms on three or four sides framing a courtyard or a patio, and each room is made up of a few jian, also called kaijian. The jian is therefore the most basic spatial unit. In the majority of the literature in English, jian is translated as 'bay', which is the closest English equivalent yet still lacks the rich meaning of jian. The character jian in traditional Chinese is an ideogram that depicts moonlight peeking through a door, which quite accurately and poetically reveals the word's meaning: an in-between state in space and time. (Fig.60) In the traditional Chinese construction system, as documented in Yingzao Faishi (Treatise on Architectural Method) compiled around 1100 (mid-Song dynasty), jian is a module of a timber-frame structure. (Fig.61) In this regard, three-jian (san kai jian) or five-jian (wu kai jian), the most common terms used to describe rooms forming a courtyard unit for dwelling purposes, actually refer to the extent of the structure, such as the width and depth of the space, without any particular meaning regarding its function, quality or resident. Therefore, jian is a framework, both physically and conceptually, through which activities are to be organised. (Fig.62) With different forms of subdivision and enclosure, a jian can become different units for various functions. As described by Ronald G. Knapp, ‘[… the bay [jian] and wooden
Fig. 61 Jian as a Structural Module in the Traditional Chinese Construction System: Yingshao Faishi (Treatise on Architectural Methods) by Li Jie, 1103 (Song Dynasty), Chap. 31
One Module of Jian Highlighted by Red Dash-line
Source: Complete Works of Liang Sicheng, Volume 7: Annotations on Yingzao Fashi by Sicheng Liang. Annotated by the author

Fig. 62 Jian Framing Various Activities Depicted in Traditional Chinese Paintings
Top: Cuntong Naoxue Tu by Qiu Ying, mid 16th century (Ming Dynasty)
Bottom: Taoye Tu Series by Sun Hu, Zhou Han and Ding Guanpeng, 18th century (Qing Dynasty)
Source: Shanghai Museum (top)
Zhongguo Meishu Cidian (Dictionary of Chinese Art) ed. Shen Rongjian and others (bottom)
framework permit a high degree of flexibility and freedom of design – essential for rural dwellings that normally undergo alteration and expansion as family size and fortune allow.\(^\text{14}\) Instead of creating defined spaces, what the ‘jian - courtyard unit - courtyard house’ composition provides is a set of principles that allows different meanings to be inscribed to the space through the act of inhabiting it. Therefore, jian reveals the archetypal characteristic of traditional Chinese courtyard houses and a cellular logic of organisation: modular units aggregate in an additive manner to form the whole.

From a single jian to a courtyard complex,\(^\text{15}\) the transformation of rural dwellings features several noteworthy stages. A three-jian room, or colloquially known as the ‘one bright, two dark’ type, is generally the basic arrangement of a courtyard unit, in which this three-jian room determines the transverse principal axis. Alternatively, it can also stand alone as an individual house for a small family. Even in a structure as simple as this, there is a correspondence between social and spatial hierarchies. The bright room in the middle is normally the largest and highest, commonly used for receiving guests, dining, family worship and sometimes the storing of family implements, while the two dark rooms on the sides are for sleeping. For a family with one married son, the parents live in the left dark room and the son and his wife on the right. When there are two married sons, the elder brother’s family occupies the left one, the younger the right and their parents live in the back of a subdivided bright room.\(^\text{16}\) In addition, in the aggregated form at later stages, it is always the individual compartment, such as a three-jian room, rather than the courtyard house as a whole, that is distinguished through a different roof height, joint details and decorations, which further confirms the cellular logic of composition. When the family size increases and possessions accumulate, the three-jian room can be expanded transversally into a five-jian, seven-jian or even more, while flanking rooms are added in the front or the back, either to provide a living space for younger generations or an auxiliary space for a kitchen, toilet or livestock. At this stage, the semi-enclosed yard in front of the main room, sometime even fully enclosed by low fences, starts to play an important role in organising production and domestic labour. The next stage of transformation

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\(^\text{15}\) ‘Courtyard house’ is a general term and can refer to houses that vary a great deal in size. To avoid confusion, I call a courtyard house consisting of more than one courtyard unit a courtyard complex.

is forming a complete courtyard unit – or what is commonly called a courtyard house – where rooms on three or four sides enclose a new courtyard or a patio. A new module is then formed. With this, a courtyard unit as a basic living module, instead of a jian, becomes the new cell for aggregation in following stages of growth, forming a larger courtyard complex. The courtyard unit as the new module is in fact an autonomous living space, which brings about a fundamental difference in spatial composition as well as relationship between modules.

The autonomous courtyard unit enables a distribution primarily based on social groups rather than functions. In a typical courtyard complex, the first courtyard unit is usually for servants, the second for dominant male members in the family, the third for female members, and in the last unit the room on the axis for ancestor worship and flanking ones for younger generations or family storage. To an extent, the assemblage of courtyard units provides an elastic spatial condition accommodating different social groups within one household and mediates relationships between master and servants, between male and female members and between generations. This elasticity within a cellular logic allows for the adjusting of size and composition in the lineage according to required activities. However, it is important to note that the sets of relationships are asymmetrical. Or, in Fei’s term, relationships in Chinese family are ‘vertical not horizontal’ as: ‘the main axes of the family are between father and son and between mother and daughter-in-law. The husband-wife relationship plays a minor role.’

The linear sequence of courtyard units creates a very strong sense of hierarchy, embodying the vertical, asymmetrical relationships within a lineage. The spatial divisions in a courtyard complex through inner walls and high doorills mark the thresholds of different courtyard units and constantly remind the inhabitants when entering another domain. People are physically reminded of the hierarchy every time they move through the complex. This subtle spatialising of hierarchy is completely intertwined with everyday life and extremely powerful. In traditional Chinese literature, the word ‘deep’ is frequently used to describe a courtyard complex, such as a famous line by the Chinese poet Ouyang Xiu: ‘How deep is the courtyard that is deep?’ The courtyard unit has thus become a dividing module, an essential device of

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17 Ibid, 68.
19 The poetry line in Chinese is: 庭院深深深几许. There are other examples, such as the phrase ‘deep house, big courtyard’ (深宅大院), which is used to describe the residences of powerful families.
domestic segregation. The superimposition of social and spatial hierarchies means that where people live in the house indicates their roles in a household, and vice versa. In this regard, the cellular logic of organisation is also the structural characteristic of a lineage.

To understand the socio-spatial hierarchy within the courtyard house is to understand the Chinese family as a governance unit. The traditional Chinese family has a patriarchal hierarchy, which is largely based on Confucian virtues. Mencius (372-289 BC), an important Chinese philosopher from the Zhou dynasty, defined five pairs of fundamental social relationships: father and son, sovereign and subject, husband and wife, old and young and friend and friend. Among them, father and son is of the greatest importance and at the base of how other relationships are conceived. The principle between father and son is called Fu Wei Zi Gang in Chinese, meaning that the father is the master and role model for the son. In this way, a relationship between superior and subordinate in parallel to biological relations is established within the family. Consequently, filial piety became the foundation of all virtues of Confucianism and the ideological model for state governance in traditional Chinese society. As Feng You-lan noted, 'the whole structure of social relationships can be conceived as a family matter, and hsiao [filial piety] is essentially loyalty to family.' The entire imperial governance system was derived from the family model and enacted through family. Therefore, the family and the state were cohesive political bodies. State governance worked through a system of extended kinship and, as explained by Fairbank:

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20 In a courtyard complex, the courtyard (or patio), apart from being a space to organise daily life, establishes a form of control, which is fundamentally different from the semi-enclosed or even fully-enclosed and in primitive types of complexes found prior to the formation of a complete courtyard unit.

21 Mencius outlined the moral principles for these five pairs of relationships in Mencius: Teng Wen Gong I.


23 Derived from Mencius’ five relationships, Fu Wei Zi Gang 父为子纲 was put forward by Dong Zhongshu, a Confucian philosopher of the Han dynasty. The character Gang is key and literally means the ‘main cord of a net’. Its extended meanings include ‘principal’, being the ‘example of’ and being the ‘representative of’. I translate it as ‘master’ and ‘role model’. Apart from father and son, the same principle applied to relationships between sovereign and subject and husband and wife.


25 Filial piety is not only used to establish patriarchal hierarchy in order to turn the family into a social and governance unit, but also to underpin reproduction as an essential function of the family as one of the doctrines claimed that there are these things that are considered unfilial and to have no posterity is the greatest of them (in Chinese: 不孝有三,无后为大).
Chinese well habituated to the family system have been prepared to accept similar patterns of status in other institutions, including the official hierarchy of the government. One advantage of a system of status is that a man knows automatically where he stands in his family or society. He can have security in the knowledge that if he does his prescribed part he may expect reciprocal action from others in the system.²⁶ Therefore, the family was the training ground for the individual to practice the doctrine of filial piety and regulate social behaviour accordingly.²⁷ The aim was not only to create members loyal to the family but also to the state.

A distinct character of a courtyard house are the high walls that create a hard boundary around the domestic space, drawing a clear line between inside and outside, between who is considered ‘one of us’ and who is not, or between what family affairs are and what not. This clear sense of boundary and enclosure is also embodied in the different usages of materials – wooden structure for inside compartments and bricks for the surrounding wall – as well as through different visual connections. No openings in the surrounding wall except the main entrance door, which is normally off the central axis of the inner courtyard, is meant to avoid any direct visual connection between the street and domestic space.²⁸ In contrast, once entering a courtyard unit, windows and doors all open to the courtyard or patio, and the visual experience is rather continuous. With the high, solid wall enclosing the domestic space of a family, the courtyard house becomes, once again, a new highly autonomous module. Traditional Chinese rural-urban fabric was largely produced by domestic modules, with mobility reduced to the minimal and every individual contained within the cell he or she belonged to.²⁹ Thus, the city is spatially the assemblage of courtyard houses and the state is in terms of political organisation that of families. In other words, in traditional Chinese society family was the locus to understand the state and the territory.

²⁷ The training of loyal members of the state or reinforcement of the patriarchal hierarchy was always conducted through everyday life. Traditional Chinese religions, as documented in Li, were largely based on the realities of daily life.
²⁸ Blocking visual connections also reflects the principles of feng shui, which state that evil spirits can be kept outside and prevented from harming the family if the relevant visual connection is blocked.
²⁹ Blocking visual connections also reflects the principles of feng shui, which state that evil spirits can be kept outside and prevented from harming the family if the relevant visual connection is blocked.
For traditional Chinese families, to adjust its size and composition is not just through balancing the domestic production and consumption within a small lineage, but occurs at multiple scales. When a large family works together as a social unit, the operating mechanism resonates with that of an enterprise. The social group or enterprise that takes on more complex functions and responsibilities often needs to expand and thus has to exceed the small lineage as a production unit. Just like a small lineage changes its size and composition to meet the demands of production, a number of lineages, often with the same ancestor, can aggregate to a larger cohesive social body, hereby making use of advantageous social relationships. This is also manifest in domestic space. For example, the residence of a retired Imperial official Wang Mingfan in the Tongshan county, Hubei province, demonstrates a clear structure of two parallel courtyard complexes (one for the owner and one for his older brother), each made up of four courtyard units. Significant is the narrow linear space that consists of a series of small patios between the two courtyard complexes. The in-between linear space is like a street or a corridor, as the two complexes are not directly connected but both have a series of doors opening up to this covered space. This explicitly shows that the two complexes belong to different lineages. At the same time, the in-between space represents a united power superior to either lineage, not only through a family ancestral temple at the end of it, but also through a series of attics used as shared storage spaces, as well as through its highly articulated roof and decoration. The aggregation of two lineages, as well as the sense of separation and unity between them, is crystallised in this Wang Mingfan residence.

When the scale of aggregation increases, the assemblage of lineages can be called a clan. Only partially built upon kinship, a clan is deliberately organised for certain specific purposes. For example, Barrington Moore Jr summarised a process of how the link between office and wealth was established and enhanced through a clan: gaining fortunes through Imperial...

29 I consider a small lineage to be a kin group primarily connected by economic relations and pragmatic concerns.
30 This residence was built in the late Qin dynasty (around the end of the 19th century) and consists of 28 courtyards and patios and occupies an area of approximately 3,000 square metres. It is colloquially known as Tongshan mansion (in Chinese: 通山大夫第).
31 In some cases of a narrow linear space like this, a place of worship is shared by several lineages and is called the common house. However, in Wang Mingfan’s residence, since it is only shared by two lineages, it is still referred to as a family ancestral temple.
services, then accumulating wealth by investing in land, then using the wealth to support prospective degree holders in the clan, and then new scholar-officials maintaining the status of the clan and gaining fortunes, thus closing the circle. Tilemann Grimm further noted that clans may even found their own academies to increase the success in the Imperial examination. What this means is that more advanced differentiation and division in social roles were required and developed in a clan in order to attain advantageous social and political mobility as well as economic profit. In the Zhangguyin village, Hunan province, the aggregation of various courtyard houses is so dense and compact that a large courtyard cluster is formed. The structure of a clan consisting of several large lineages made up of small lineages is manifested by courtyard units forming courtyard complexes and these complexes relating to each other through corridors, ponds and gardens. Looking at the distribution of living rooms (bright rooms), bedrooms (dark rooms), flanking rooms and kitchens, the cellular logic is very evident. This dwelling cluster is an autonomous microcosm made up of smaller microcosms. It contains everything needed by clan members, from living to production, from more intimate to more collective space, and from everyday to ritualistic activities. The family as a social unit constituted the traditional Chinese society and, at the same time, was a society on its own.

Based on all socio-spatial mechanisms outlined above, the traditional Chinese family can be understood as a multi-scalar apparatus, a superimposition of organisational layers responding to different tasks and roles in life and in society. The cellular logic of spatial organisation, from the jia to courtyard unit to courtyard complex, then to village and city, is the fundamental principle that is produced by and productive of the traditional Chinese family.

The modular unit and cellular logic are contingent on a coherent social structure that clearly defined social ties – for example, family relations derived from kinship in the case of a traditional courtyard house – which

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33 Barrington Moore Jr, Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World (Hemsworth Reprint Books, 1969), 165. Though Moore Jr originally used the term ‘lineage’ when he described this process, his use of this term is closer to what I define as a clan rather than a small lineage. In addition, Moore Jr later admits that the clan worked in the same way as lineage. For him, a clan also included a substantial proportion of peasants.

actually resonates with the historical Chinese conception of territory. When this underpinning social structure is undermined, it causes radical transformation. When the last Imperial dynasty in China was overthrown by the Xinhai Revolution in the 1911, lasting warfare and social upheavals over the following decades disrupted the social structure of traditional families. The courtyard complexes of exclusive lineages and clans were gradually fragmented, with courtyard units increasingly occupied by small families and individuals with no kindred relation. Thus, although today traditional hutong neighbourhoods still exist, they have become a cheap place to live for low-income earners, such as rural migrant workers. During my fieldwork in Beijing in 2015, I documented a courtyard house in the Baitasi area that was shared by 31 different households.* Fig. 71: Its two courtyards were filled with sheds, storage areas, toilets and temporary kitchen stoves. The transformation of the courtyard from the most dominant space to one largely subordinate and segmented reveals the destruction of the socio-spatial order of the courtyard house model. The decline of patriarchal authority, breakdown of traditional family structure and shrinkage of family size have resulted in the collapse of courtyard houses as an autonomous dwelling unit and constitutive module of the larger rural-urban structure.

* A courtyard house such as this is colloquially called a Dazayuan, which literally means ‘the big miscellaneous yard’.
However, there are exceptions: the *tulou*. The *tulou*, or earthen building in literal translation, is a rural dwelling type in the Fujian province of south China, dating back to the 16th century. Although the *tulou* is considered a traditional dwelling type, its construction surged in the three decades after the P. R. China was founded, the period of a nationwide collectivisation. Among the many aspects of a *tulou* worth noting, the thesis will only focus on the question: What allows this dwelling type to adapt to the changing social contexts of traditional China and a new collectivist era?

In general, the main characteristic of the *tulou* is a large clan living together in a single, enclosed, fortified and centripetal mega-structure that follows egalitarian principles. Chengqi Lou, built in 1712, exemplifies a corridor-based type, with uniform housing units connected by linear corridors forming an outer ring, while shared sheds for livestock, guest housing and common study rooms form the two inner rings, and an ancestor hall defines the central node. However, there is a clear hierarchy between the individual living units and the shared ‘facilities’ with a strong emphasis on the latter. Yet the relationship between living units is completely non-hierarchical. Given the strong family hierarchy in traditional clans, the non-hierarchical distribution of living units in a *tulou* is striking. As widely acknowledged, this is primarily because the *tulou* was originally built as a defence structure against Japanese pirates in the late Ming and early Qin dynasties. The other of the two main types of a *tulou* is the unit-based model. What differentiates this model from the corridor-based model is that each unit has a higher level of independence, such as an indoor staircase, and sometimes there are no shared facilities in the centre except common wells, as seen, for example, in the famous Eryi Lou.

36 Though it has been argued that *tulou* can be dated back to the 12th century, Huang Hanmin asserts that tracing the dates of these buildings based on the genealogical tree of certain clans is not reliable as *tulou* were only built once the clan had been settled for a long period and had accumulated sufficient wealth. Adopting this perspective, the earliest clearly documented *tulou* dates back to the late 16th century. See Hanmin Huang, *Fujian Tulou: Zhongguo Chuantong Minju de Guibao* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2009), 154-157.

37 For example, in Meilin township and Shuyang township, Nanjing county, 193 out of 469 *tulou* were built after P. R. China was founded. For more details see Jing Zheng, “Hegu Minju yu Zhuzhai Hezuoshe: 1949 nian Yihou Jianzao de Tulou” [Join Stock Vernacular Dwelling: *Tulou* Built after 1949], Architectural Journal (Zhongguo Jianshe Xuebao) 1 (2004): 1.

38 The other reason suggested by Hanmin Huang is the land shortage in mountain areas of the Fujian province. See Hanmin Huang, *Fujian Tulou: Zhongguo Chuantong Minju de Guibao* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2009), 213-226 and 293-316.
the importance of collectivity is also stressed through a *tulou’s* vertically organised living unit. For example, in Chengqi Lou, every unit has a kitchen on the ground floor, a storage space on the second, and bedrooms on the third and fourth. No interior staircases within the unit means that inhabitants need to use the shared corridor and staircase to go from one room to another in daily life. This reduces privacy to the minimal and facilitates surveillance. Therefore, this spatial composition itself is a powerful means of regulating the social behaviour of its inhabitants through shared norms of the community, and thus constructs a governance system based on mutual supervision.

Apart from the discussed spatial features, a hypothesis of the *tulou as a housing co-operative* put forward by Zheng Jing adds another layer to the organisational mechanism of a *tulou* community. Based on a survey and interviews in Chuxi village, Zheng noted that throughout the construction process and use of a *tulou* there have been collaborations beyond clan groups. According to her, the materials and funds required to build a *tulou* were collected by each participating family contributing an equal share instead of a patriarch allocating the clan wealth, and when the younger generation grew up and start their own family this mechanism allowed them to join any *tulou* with vacancies in the same village, or to gather enough support to build a new one. In this way, after a few generations, the clan organisation gradually dissolves due to the mix of inhabitants in each *tulou*, while the equal contribution by each member through sharing the construction cost, part-taking in maintaining the common space and participating in collective rituals becomes more and more prominent. Thus, even when the original need for defence is no longer important, the social relationships among inhabitants produced by and productive of a collective form of living has shaped a lasting *tulou* community.


41 Ibid.
The next rural dwelling model, the people’s commune housing, consists of three parts: pre-commune rural house, commune housing proposal and a realised case. The first two parts provide the context essential to a comprehensive understanding of the realised case, one with seemingly contradictory characters.

Though the traditional courtyard house model has declined, unlike the *tulou*, it does not mean that its organisational principles have left no trace. A survey in 1958 conducted in the Yelong township, Qingpu county in Shanghai, illustrated that the most common type of rural family house at the time was a fairly standard three-jian house – the ‘one bright two dark’ type. The bright room was divided into one larger part as the main living space and another smaller part at the back for storage, while the two dark rooms were each divided into two equal units, with three units used as bedrooms and one as a kitchen. The other two types documented in the survey are largely variations of this three-jian model. Additional rooms were added by taking the dark rooms on two sides as the anchor points of extension, while the bright room was always kept untouched with no additional rooms attached in front or to the back. Moreover, in all three cases the bright room was always situated along the axis of the main entrance, the place where a family shrine is normally placed against the wall that directly faces the main entrance. This particular way of expansion confirms that these simple rural houses still largely share the organisational logic of the courtyard house, as regardless of the number of rooms there is always one bright room (and one courtyard in the case of a courtyard unit) that represents the unity of the family. One can therefore argue that these rural houses in 1958 are still typologically the same as the primitive rural dwelling types prior to the formation of a complete courtyard unit in traditional China. In other words, the three-jian principle as a way to organise rural dwelling has persisted.

Nevertheless, there is one main difference – the distribution of the kitchen in relation to the family structure. The survey of the Yelong township in 1958 showed that rural households with 1-4 members and 4-7 members were 43.6% and 54.5% respectively, and the ratio for households with two generations and three generations were 60.5% and 19.6%.* There was a high percentage of married children living together with their parents. In
the two unit variations, a kitchen and a bedroom always appear in pairs and there are one or more secondary entrances. Furthermore, in the second case, the circulation shows that inhabitants need to pass through the kitchen to access the bedroom. This indicates that the combination of a kitchen and bedroom was the spatial unit for one family branch. Separate kitchens suggest that family branches manage their meals individually, as a daily activity and in financial terms. Every family branch having its own kitchen meant claiming (relative) independence, both spatially and financially, indicating that the financial dominance and control by the patriarch was challenged. The maintained status of the bright room and the emergence of separate kitchens reveal a tension between a patriarchal system and the changing family structure in a prelude to a nationwide collectivisation through the people’s commune movement. To fully implement it, a radical social restructuring by the state aimed to dismantle the family as the unit of production, governance and social structure. To this end, spatial design was used as an essential device to radically reconstruct domestic space.

In fact, the survey of the Yelong township was meant to facilitate the design of the Hongqi people’s commune discussed in the previous chapters. Compared to existing rural houses in this township, all three proposed commune housing units abolished both the bright room and the kitchen, and were simply a combination of bedrooms. (Fig.75) (Fig.76) In the proposed plans, a family’s common space, indicated only by a set of table and chairs, was reduced to the bare minimum and integrated with the space used for sleeping.\(^43\) Given that the family shrine was normally placed in the bright room, the removal of the bright room also denied ancestral worship and patriarchal authority. This reveals that the idea of the family was to be significantly weakened, and in the collectivised production in a people’s commune the family was no longer the basic production unit. Instead, every commune member was regulated by a work point system, in which individuals earned work points based on assigned jobs, with these work points translated into a quota of basic daily necessities and/or monetary payment. This system made everyone equal labourer and largely liberated a female labour force. This also meant that the economic structure that saw the patriarch in charge of all financial gains of the family was subverted.

In addition, with all means of production collectivised, the importance of inheritance – essential to guarantee the continuity of a family or

\(^43\) Nevertheless, an individual entrance to each housing unit, directly accessible from the street, was preserved.
The lineage of traditional rural life was undermined. But collectivisation was not just confined to production. In an ideal commune, there was to be no private property, from land to livestock to a table and a chair, and every aspect of life was to be collective, with cooking and eating within the household replaced by communal dining, which explains the removal of kitchens in commune housing units. To this end, the design for a youth dormitory in the Panyu people’s commune presents a more radical version of collectivised domestic space. (Fig. 77)

The youth dormitory had the appearance of a modern apartment building, which consciously negated traditional rural life. Across two wings, a series of small cells were linked by long corridors with shared bathrooms at each end. Each cell was shared by two single members, and had no private space. Other facilities, such as shared rooms for reading, learning and entertainment, were instead laid out in the middle section of the building linking the two residential wings. An assembly hall facing the entrance and located on the axis of the symmetrical building was the only prominent space in the courtyard, indicating its high status. As this youth dormitory was designed for outstanding young commune members, it was particularly important that its educational function was expressed in the spatial design. The attempt to instil in the young a collectivised lifestyle was actualised by almost eliminating individual space and by prioritising collective ones. In this way, the traditional social structure and governance based on the family were eliminated, reducing the social bonds among family members to the minimum. Relationships between family and society, between individual and family, and between individuals within the same family were significantly restructured. The dwelling was seen as a primary means to shape new collective subjectivities through the reformation of domestic space and the idea of domesticity.

The people’s commune housing proposals that sprung up in the late 1950s spatialised the new state ambition of collective living and production. This confronted the social customs and mentalities formed by the family tradition deeply rooted in Chinese rural society, as discussed in the previous chapters. In the Shigushan commune settlement, all housing rows are laid out equally spaced and uniform in orientation, building materials and construction. Despite a strong administrative hierarchy between ordinary commune members and leaders of production team, production brigade and the commune, they were assigned the same type of living unit. Each housing unit has a uniform ‘core’ consisting of one living room, one storage room and one kitchen, yet the
Fig. 78: Shigushan Commune Housing Units

Top: The Use Condition of a Commune Housing Unit in 2017 (Two original partition walls removed by the resident)
Bottom: Commune Housing Unit Type Variations

Fig. 78 and 79: The way a three-jian unit is partitioned in this commune housing is very similar to the basic type of rural houses in the Yelong township: the bright room divided into living room and storage, and the dark rooms into two equal units. The only difference is that all kitchens in the commune housing are positioned at the back of the house as an ancillary structure, instead of being part of the main structure. In most bright rooms (living rooms) in the Shigushan commune housing units, there is still today a family shrine placed against the wall facing the entrance, but interestingly, in most cases, instead of family ancestors there is a photograph of chairman Mao Zedong, the founder of the P. R. China who initiated the commune movement. A ‘family’ shrine to Mao reveals the paradox that despite the state’s aim of social restructuring, the new radically different collective institution had to adapt existing social and spatial mechanisms. A similar paradox is found in the traditional three-jian structure being used as the principle organisation of the commune housing. This confirms the resilience of the three-jian principle in rural dwelling, and while commune institution and family tradition may be two opposing forces they are interwoven and together have lastingly shaped China’s rural society until today.

45. Married couples and children aged over 12 years old were entitled to their own rooms. However, a boy could have a room to his own, but girls had to share. Children below 12 years of age would share the room with their parents. If a three-generation family were living in one house, the older generation would have one room. For example, if a married couple lived with their elderly parents and had one boy above 12 years old and one below, they would be assigned a three-bedroom house.
46. In the existing commune housing rows in Shigushan, there is a visible structural gap between the main living area and the kitchen. However, the then vice-leader of the Shigushan Production Brigade confirmed that a kitchen was part of the housing units from the beginning. Nevertheless, the structural gap and the way the kitchen roof is constructed indicates that the kitchen is ancillary to the main three-jian structure.
47. Based on my interviews, maintaining a shrine to Mao in one’s home is a way to show respect. At the same time, villagers believe that this can prevent the house from being harmed by evil spirits.
Fig. 79: Shiguashan Commune Housing Row
Measured by Architectural Association Wuhan Visiting School 2016-2017 (co-directed by the author); Redrawn by the author
Having examined the historical ideas of family, the contradictions between the multi-layered traditional patriarchal family, the clan-based co-operative of the *tulou* and the attempt to dismantle the family in the commune era, it can be argued that there is nothing natural about the form of a family. In fact, the family has always been an apparatus of power relations, a mechanism deeply rooted in Chinese societies. The historical transformations of rural dwelling models further demonstrate an interactive relationship between the family form and domestic space, or, in other words, a socio-spatial diagram that always evolves through a two-way process. (Fig.81) The agency of this socio-spatial diagram is to shape and reshape the way in which inhabitants organise their lives through the everyday use of space.

The *tulou* reveals how a spatial model can form a specific decision-making and governance mechanism in a community. Furthermore, its organisational idea resonates with that of commune housing proposals, both of which aimed to transform the idea of collectiveness and solidarity in inhabitants’ subconscious through everyday life. From a different perspective, while the commune model is regarded as the origin of the collective tradition seen in contemporary rural China, the *tulou* reveals that this idea of the collective is already present in the history of rural dwellings. In both cases, individual will was minimised through the creation of a homogeneous living situation for inhabitants, which instead emphasised the sense of being a member of the collective. Social relationships were to be constructed as much as possible at the level of a collective, and any other relations that would form smaller social units below the collective were to be dismantled. However, the ‘negotiated’ result of the implementation of commune housing, as exemplified by the Shigusan case, proves how resilient the family structure is as a social organisation. To an extent, the Shigushan commune housing case represents a compromise between the collective will and family tradition, and thus is a combination of the spatial principles of the *tulou* and the traditional courtyard house through employing three-*jian* units in a manner of row housing.

This attests to the instrumentality of the idea of *jian* – an in-between state in space and time, and how it transcends the traditional courtyard house model from which it originates. In structural terms, this feature was enabled by the traditional Chinese timber beam-column system, which, rather than being out-dated, shows distinct similarities to the organisational principle of the Dom-Ino – a housing prototype developed by Le Corbusier in the early 20th
century, which laid the foundation for the contemporary building system. What the idea of *jian* provides is a socio-spatial framework that conveys a shared knowledge of rural habitation, one subjected to neither collective nor family traditions and thus arguably accommodating both. In this regard, in the context of contemporary Chinese rural society facing the challenge of organising atomised rural populations without undermining the viability of individual households, the idea of *jian* has the potential to be instrumental in organising rural domestic space in both spatial and conceptual terms.

In practical terms, the Shigushan case also presents one possibility of how the three-jian principle can adapt to higher density, and sheds light on its potential contemporary applications.
To understand the phenomenon of the floating population from the perspective of a contemporary rural family in China, one needs to understand the typical pattern that rural-urban migration adopts: though legally registered in villages, adults move to cities to work with limited rights to house ownership, employment and social welfare, leaving behind their ageing parents and young children.  

This ‘floating’ status can be described, physically, as the movement between a workplace in the city and a home community in the countryside, and, psychologically, as belonging to neither the city nor the countryside or their respective cultures. Some demographic studies suggest that the back-and-forth movement of these workers is only partially due to their lack of rights to reside in cities for the long term, and is, to some extent, motivated by the desire to live this way.

The floating lifestyle allows rural migrant workers...
to acquire higher incomes in the city and at the same time secure economic and social roots in the countryside. However, for rural villages, floating populations mean that the middle generation is missing from communities and families live apart. As discussed in Chapter 2, these rural migrant workers often send a large portion of their earnings back home to fund the construction of new houses in their villages. It is these houses that materialise the daily practice of millions of China’s rural population and, in fact, manifest a fundamental shift in the idea of household and its management.

Ms Guo’s house in Shigushan village is a typical self-built rural family house. Entering the ornamental gate, a yard connects a two-storey building to the north, providing the main living space for five family members (Ms Guo and her husband, Ms Guo’s elderly mother and two sons), and a flanking building to the west contains a shared dining room and kitchen. The enclosed yard is where vegetable plots and family possessions are arranged and stored: small areas for black sesame, carrots, peanuts and storage are distributed along its edges and in corners. This layout clearly shows how family members move daily between the buildings through the yard to cook and eat, plant vegetables and feed domestic livestock. Therefore, the yard is the nucleus of the family house, the focus of the family’s daily activities and a productive space for villagers where produce can be dried, handicraft products made and domestic animals raised.

While Ms Guo’s house presents the basic picture of contemporary rural multigenerational living, the changing family structure and modes of household management resulting from the missing middle generation reveals itself when Ms Guo’s home is compared with the home of the Liu brothers from the same village. As the main labour force securing family incomes, the Liu brothers work in the transportation industry in coastal regions in China, more than a thousand kilometres away from their home village where their wives, children and parents live together. Looking at their self-built house, the various demands for independence and control by family branches and generations can be seen: even though the two brothers’ families live in the same three-storey building, they have identical yet separate entrances, living rooms and staircases; and even though half of the rooms in the main building are vacant, their parents still choose to inhabit an adapted old school room across the street, providing them with their own living room and bedroom. However, as in Ms Guo’s...
Fig. 84  Kitchen and Kitchen Garden in the Yard
Ms Guo’s Family House, Shiguashan Village, 2017
Photo: Architectural Association Wuhan Visiting School 2016-2017 (co-directed by the author)

Fig. 85  Live Stock at the Gate and Cooking and Dining Space in the Yard
Mr Wen’s Family Houses, Shiguashan Village, 2017
Photo: Architectural Association Wuhan Visiting School 2016-2017 (co-directed by the author)
Guo’s house, the centre of this household is the yard, a buffer zone between the brothers’ main building and their parents’ room, where all three parties of the household share two kitchens, two toilets, a dining room and a kitchen garden. The configuration of the yard supports the idea that cooking, eating, gardening and the care of children and the elderly are shared and joint responsibilities, which defines the daily life of these families. At the same time, the sense of separation reminds them that all of this takes place in multi-layered forms of collaboration within the extended family between genders, generations and households.

In this type of household management, the yard provides a space for association and negotiation. In the Liu brothers’ house, all the doors of the main and flanking buildings face towards the yard and family members constantly move through this space to carry out chores. Traces of how they organise their lives are inscribed in the yard through the distribution of daily objects, such as tables, chairs, racks of clothes, tools, piles of firewood and straw, water basins and tanks, a stack of roof tiles, and so on, as well as a large piece of black fabric that creates shaded space. More than a centre of circulation, the yard provides a spatial structure through which domestic labour and subsistence production are organised. In this way, the yard mediates and orders family social relationships.

During interviews, I was told that the dimensions of the Liu brothers’ yard was determined by the number of round tables they need for family reunions, typically during the Spring Festival or Qingming Festival. This detail reveals another layer of function for the yard: a space for family rituals. Ritual activities, such as family reunions, weddings, baby showers or funerals, create a sense of unity for family members on the one hand, and demonstrate hospitality to fellow villagers on the other. The yard is an essential device in weaving together the social fabric of village life, reconnecting social relations and demonstrating family fortune and power. Rituals that occur at the village level can also occur in family yards. For example, during the celebration of the end of the Spring Festival and the start of a new year in Jiangjiawan natural village, within the Shigushan administrative village, a Buddha statue tours the village to be briefly greeted by each household in their yard by fire crackers. This exemplifies how

53 There are also logistical reasons for having kitchens and toilets detached from the main building. Ventilation and water supply are easier and cheaper to install in simple flanking buildings, and kitchen waste can feed livestock and human waste can be composted for agricultural use; therefore, it is more convenient to manage and recycle this waste when the kitchens and toilets are separate from the main living spaces.

54 The Spring Festival is traditional Chinese New Year and the Qingming Festival, also known as Tomb-Sweeping Day, is when people honour and pay tribute to their ancestors at grave sites.
Fig 87  The Yard in Liu Brothers’ Family House, Shiguashan Village, 2016
Photo and collage by the author
the family yard extends beyond the domestic sphere and becomes part of a communal village structure. This also holds true in daily village life. Something as simple as an open gate and a stool in front of the gate can be an invitation for social encounters. The family yards in a rural village thus create a series of elastic, penetrable zones around houses, allowing for multiple layers of subtle relationships between the household and the village. This capacity to mediate particularly resonates with what Fei Xiaotong calls ‘the special quality of elasticity’ whereby the Chinese kinship network is organised in a variable pattern and the scale of the family can be ‘expanded or contracted according to the specific time and place’. This elasticity is a fundamental characteristic of rural social relationships and Chinese rural society.

With a missing middle generation in rural China, the elastic relationship manifests as a flexible, spatially stretched form of labour division and collaboration between genders, generations and households. It is quite common when both husband and wife work away from home that their parents take care of the children and farmland. Division of labour thus occurs at an intergenerational level. In situations where the elderly generation is not able to help or work, inter-household assistance takes place within the extended family and sometimes among neighbours. In short, the multi-generational and cross-household dependency on extended family members is increasing. Therefore, this contemporary mode of collaboration reflects the practice of traditional lineage of adjusting its size and composition in accordance with changing family needs. On this basis, it is understandable that some scholars, such as C. Cindy Fan, suggest that the extended family tradition is resurgent in today’s rural society. As discussed in the previous section, a fundamental feature of the traditional Chinese extended family is social hierarchy and order within the family and centred around patriarchal authority. However, the absence of the middle generation, particularly men and thus fathers, is significantly disrupting the power structure within families and is shaking traditional family structure to its core. In other words, while adjustments in traditional lineage were largely patrilineal and thus enhanced patriarchal authority, in the wake of the missing generation, today’s rural household arrangements actually dissolve the family hierarchy. Therefore, I argue that the changing practice of the rural Chinese household resonates more with neighbourhood tradition in China than lineage. As accurately described by Fei: ‘In the traditional structure, every family regards its own household as the centre and draws a circle around it. This circle is the neighbourhood, which is established to facilitate reciprocation in daily life. […] But a neighbourhood is not a fixed group. Instead, it is an area whose size is determined by the power and authority of each centre.’ Thus, the idea of the household presented by rural migrant workers’ families is no longer that of a homogenous, well-defined and closed unit, but rather a dissolved one.

From a different perspective, in legal terms, a Chinese rural household is an institutional unit recognised by the state and through which the responsibility for taxation and the three rights of the rural hukou are assigned. According to the Regulations on Household Registration of the People’s Republic of China, in a village, when adult children have gained financial independence they are entitled to establish a new, individual household subject to the approval of the village committee. In the context of the missing middle generation, the practice of the elderly taking care of land for their adult children thus manifests in concrete economic terms the dissolving boundary between two households.

Then, a question arises: why is an emerging dissolved household significant?

Without doubt, the dissolved household is a form of exploitation of rural families by the state. Family members left behind in the village are primarily women and the elderly, whose housekeeping, childcare and subsistence production provides a basic form of social security for their families. In short, wives and elderly parents make it possible for rural migrant workers to serve as the cheap labour that is fuelling China’s rapid urbanisation. The work done in home villages is in fact essential to keeping the capitalist machine going in cities. It is clearly productive but completely unrecognised and, of course, unpaid. Though a circular lifestyle may appear to be a choice made freely by rural migrant workers themselves, the situation that drives this choice is ultimately created by the alliance between market interests, i.e. the need for a mobile labour force, and state power, modifications in the hukou system, for instance. This fundamental alliance is the ‘field of power’


as defined by Pierre Bourdieu. The concept of ‘field’ can be understood as the playground of social life as governed by particular sets of social relations, or in Bourdieu’s own words, ‘a structured social space’. As noted by Bourdieu:

“Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space. […] All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies.”

In this regard, fragmenting the household reflects the position-taking of rural families and how they adjust themselves in order to improve their position in the field. This being said, it is crucial to note that field is not deterministic, as the structuralist point of view may assert. It is rather a dialectic process through which the field and who acts in the field constantly shape and reshape one another. This perspective introduces the possibility of seeing the dissolved household as something beyond the result of exploitation and instead as the ongoing reconstruction of the immediate context in which rural families live and operate. It thus becomes viable to explore the impact the dissolved household may have on the field of power that is producing it.

In essence, the household is the nucleus of relationships. The oracle-bone inscription of the Chinese character 家, the word for family and home, has a distinct spatial feature: the iconic shape of a shelter and an animal, normally recognised as a pig under a roof. This ideogram indicates an initial definition of a ‘household’: all family members live under the same roof and possess the (shared) means of production. In its most basic sense, the social and spatial nexus evolving around dissolved households provides a network of mutual help and immediate care at both domestic and neighbourhood levels, a set of non-market relations essential to people’s livelihood. John Friedmann defines the household as ‘a unit for making decisions on a continuing and daily basis concerning the use of household resources and other matters’, based on which he asserts that the household is both a political economy and a polity. I would further argue that negotiation and collaboration in respect

59 Ibid, 40-41.
60 John Friedmann, “Rethinking the Economy: The Whole-Economy Model” in *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development* (Cambridge, UK: Blackwell, 1992), 46. To augment Friedmann’s argument, the term ‘economics’ originally comes from the ancient Greek word oikos, which relates to the family, the house and household management.
of the common needs of a social group is always a fundamental dimension of household management. By challenging the well-defined, closed domain of the contemporary family norms, the dissolved household gives extra emphasis to this dimension.

Though initially formed out of domestic economic necessity, new social relations are produced beyond the household level. As explained earlier, the dissolved household should not be mistaken for a return to the traditional extended family, nor simply associated with a broader and looser notion of the pre-modern family. In a dissolved household, emerging relations are defensive, opportunistic, temporary and able to reproduce themselves. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, the phenomenon of the missing middle generation is a cycle: when the current rural migrant workers retire from their city jobs and return to their home village, a younger generation may take their turn as migrant workers and leave the village. As pointed out by He Xuefeng, this migration cycle has created a preliminary, medium-scale structure in village production in the sense that the redistribution and integration of farmland is occurring within one extended family or among acquaintances in the village.61 He’s observation reveals that collaboration initiated in the domestic realm of a family is evolving into an adaptive mode of local production that crosses the boundary of individual household and works beyond family relations. Of particular significance, this shift marks the moment when atomised rural populations started to organise themselves in response to internal forces that are derived from the society of acquaintances. Therefore, with appropriate support, it is conceivable that this medium-scale structure of production can revive the inner-decaying village from within. In this light, the dissolved household may itself become a new form of rural social structure, one that is underpinned by the existing cultural nexus of a village community and is ultimately productive of new channels within this nexus. It is in this sense that the dissolved household as a social model is constructing a contemporary form of the cultural nexus of power in Chinese rural society. Thus, the dissolved household can be seen as the foundation to rethink, and the locus to redefine, what rurality means today.

This emerging new rural social structure penetrates the boundary of an individual household and potentially transcends its limitations by creating a vital link to the extended family, immediate neighbourhood and village community and potentially beyond. Central to the establishment of this link are non-market relations: mutual help and immediate care. In a contemporary context where market relations are forcefully extending themselves to every corner of social space, for example, by constructing a practice of everyday life largely defined by consumption choices, and through atomising the family to its minimal form, the nuclear family, the link demonstrated by the dissolved household is almost a form of rebellion, starting from the home.

Adding to the story of urban sprawl that erodes farmland and drives farmers to cities, new rural settlements featuring a collection of urban or suburban types of houses are being dropped into agricultural fields. Dense rows of villas, sometimes with a yard, townhouses and mid-rise apartments form a sad collage of middle-class suburbia. The previously discussed New Zhaishan Village Community project has taken this sprawl to the next level by introducing high-rise apartment as a new, radical housing model for rural dwelling. The floorplan of the proposed housing presents the typical urban-style apartment in China. Two to four units are arranged on the same floor with the shared circulation area connecting the units to the ground level. Each unit consists of a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, two or three bedrooms and one or two toilets, with the floor area ranging from 90 m² to 150 m². The potential for multi-generational living is addressed by simply adding more bedrooms. Therefore, this type of modern apartment is still a standardised self-contained unit designed for the nuclear family.

Home is never merely a domestic project. Modern apartment buildings rising from agricultural fields is more than a radical disjuncture of the built environment. To understand the impact of this type of nuclear family flat on the rural space first requires an understanding of the nuclear family and the role it has played in the larger socio-political context. It has been widely argued that the family as a basic unit of society is always at the centre of economic and political transformations and is essential to realising new social conditions. In the context of China, coinciding with the Opium Wars of the mid-19th
century, the traditional extended family and clan started to collapse and were then fiercely deconstructed in the Xinhai Revolution in 1911. Destroying the traditional form of family was seen at the time as an essential part of the attack on feudal ideology. Further fragmentation of the family continued along with the warfare and social upheaval of the following three decades. After the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, as previously discussed, nationwide collectivisation and industrialisation through the urban danwei and rural people’s commune aimed to shape the collective subjectivity and thus reduce socio-economic dependency among family members to the bare minimum. This period came to an end in 1978 when the Economic Reform was launched to create a full-scale market economy. With the One Child Policy implemented in 1980, the idea of the modern nuclear family came into being in China. It was in this context that the nuclear family flat emerged as an essential device to materialise and reinforce the modern definition of family as a small, closed unit. When the state retreated from housing provision previously provided as a form of urban welfare through the danwei system, housing commodification coupled with a growing real estate market gradually wiped out the collective form of living of the danwei and replaced it with a modern lifestyle. Home ownership has since become the aspiration of a new urban middle-class, which, apart from promoting urban consumption, also intensifies social stratification and class divisions.

Given the above, I argue that the nuclear family and the nuclear family flat as the norm, something we take for granted today, are in fact a construct of modernisation. Speaking of family structure, the parent-child relationship is the core of the modern nuclear family. When the child grows up and becomes a parent, a new nuclear family is formed. Thus, the structure of the nuclear family is a temporary model, which is in sharp contrast to the traditional structure of family, which hinges on continuity in order to fulfil a far wider range of tasks in social life in addition to reproduction. As a result of being an atomised social unit, the modern family is unable to complete the cycle of production and consumption on its own and is thus made dependent on the market as well as the state apparatus. Through the spatial configuration of housing units, the flat or apartment demarcates a private domain that is exclusively for the family.

62 The Xinhai Revolution marked the end of China’s imperial era. The Republic of China was established in the following year in 1912.
63 Housing commodification in China was a long process. It started in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping’s Four Modernizations were launched and went through several stages as marketisation intensified during the 1980s and 90s. Around the turn of the century, housing commodification had more or less pervaded the entire country.
who owns it. This reinforces the idea that everything that happens inside is the domestic affair of the family and thus separate from wider society, which is not the way family life has been organised historically. The thesis refers to this housing type as the nuclear family flat.

Regarding this transformation, China is not at all unique. Discussing the modern formation of Japanese domesticity, Jordan Sand notes that ‘although the basic forms of domestic life were not themselves new, the notion of “home” as an intimate space sequestered from society and centred on parents and children was alien’.64 Following this modern construct of family, new responsibilities are assigned and a new arrangement of roles within the family is imposed. For example, the long-standing gender division of labour that has created a prescribed role for women to perform unpaid housework is in fact an under-recognised form of exploitation and a fundamental cause of inequality. Dolores Hayden identifies two acts, largely normalised in industrialisation, that have caused this situation: ‘the physical separation of household space from public space, and the economic separation of the domestic economy from the political economy’.65 Though Hayden makes this argument primarily with reference to American society, it still holds true for contemporary China. This kind of presupposed relationship between family members and required daily practices as well as an imposed domestic economy are formalised by the typological composition of the nuclear family flat through drawing boundaries, creating subdivisions and prescribing specific functions to rooms. Therefore, through the nuclear family and the flat, people became productive members of a modern industrial society, as well as a force of consumption.

Then, what does it mean when the urban nuclear family flat goes rural?

In rural regeneration projects, the urban-style apartment comes with the much-needed provision of basic infrastructure and sanitation, making it desirable to many. Improved facilities, such as water, electricity, gas, sewage and internet access, do provide an immediate improvement in quality of life, but at the same time they create new financial demands and thus change the everyday life of rural inhabitants. So does the spatial configuration. In the urban-style apartment, the layout denies the existence of yards, kitchen gardens, orchards

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Family Structure:

Generation - 1
Grandmother (interviewee): Living in Shigushan village
Grandfather: Passed away in 2011

Generation - 2
Daughter: Working in Wuhan (The municipality where Shigushan village is located)
Two Sons: Working in Wenzhou (One of the most favoured place to work for rural migrant workers)

Generation - 3
2 Grandsons and 1 Granddaughter

Grandmother’s Daily Routine:
5-6 a.m. Get up and breakfast
7-11 a.m. Attending kitchen garden or family farmland
11-12 a.m. Lunch
12-5 p.m. Rest or take a nap after lunch; Then attending kitchen garden or family farmland
5-6 p.m. Dinner
6-9 p.m. Chat with neighbours (sometimes square dance)
9 p.m. Go to sleep

The removal of the yard is not only intended to exclude domestic livestock and their products from rural family life, but also to reconfigure and rearrange the established rhythm of everyday life. During my interviews with villagers in Shigushan village, they often described their daily routines as centred around the same two things: the care of livestock and social interaction with fellow villagers. Fig.92 The activities that occur around a yard may seem minor, such as exchanging vegetables to cook for dinner, looking after other people’s chickens and ducks, having casual chats and sharing a meal together, as well as participating in my interviews and giving me a treat of watermelons. However, it is these moments that are the main source of the social interactions that constitute the fabric of rural life. Therefore, as an important space for both production and reproduction, the yard emphasises moments in rural life that dominate socialisation processes. Moreover, these seemingly insignificant interactions are in fact crucial moments that reconfirm social bonds beyond family and form the foundation of a network of mutual help and immediate care. In this regard, by changing the most familiar and intimate domain of people’s lives and the physical manifestation of ideas of home, whether a flat or house, the operation of rural family structure is significantly disrupted and the mechanism of the formation of a rural form of life is undermined.

However, it is also through everyday practice that the perhaps subconscious resistance of rural residents is manifested. The new Madu village community seems to enjoy its new look: walking down the wide concrete road, three-storey family houses are organised in orderly rows on both sides, uniformly clad in red or grey tiles with white trim, yet vegetable plots in the areas beside the road are less harmonious. Villagers continue to reclaim these little plots in leftover common spaces to regain a connection with the land. It is their way of lamenting the removal of the yard and adapting the urban layout of new housing developments to their own rules. The public space in the new Madu
village community is generous. A dual carriageway marks the central axis, which cuts across the orthogonal grid of densely distributed family houses leading to a ‘cultural’ square and a cluster of public facilities located in the centre of the newly-reconstructed village. A large sculpture of a leaping horse is installed right in the middle of the square, literally representing the name of the village (from Ma, meaning horse). However, the roads designed for cars, the cultural square and the open space in front of public facilities are often ‘hijacked’ by inhabitants to sort and dry their harvest. This is less because of economic necessity and more about reaffirming a sense of traditional self and purpose to themselves and others, and about maintaining an associated network of ‘front-door neighbours’.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau distinguishes ‘strategy’, a set of relations imposed by the producer who is within the power structure, from ‘tactics’, actions taken by the consumer or user in situations produced and performed by strategies. As De Certeau puts it, ‘[the user] does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.’ From this perspective, villagers move into urban-style apartments, the products of the developer, planning bureau and local government, not only with their belongings but also their ways of living. Through the tactics of everyday use, rural inhabitants make their mark on the imposed environment and re-appropriate and transform it bit by bit to make it their own. By reclaiming territory through their acts and memories, rural inhabitants resist.

The emphasis on the spontaneous spatial alterations to the environment made by local inhabitants, as well as the importance of the yard, is not simply nostalgia about the ‘good old days’. It recognises how daily practices in rural life are formed, or in other words, the meaning of the rural lifestyle. In this regard, Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ is of particular relevance. Habitus is notably referred to as a ‘feel for the game’ that determines agents’ intuitive, actions and reactions, perceptions, aspirations and thus practices in different aspects of social life. The context in which habitus is formed, in which it operates and in which it reproduces itself is the field, or simply put, the ‘game’. Central to habitus are the production of practices and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices. Through the relationship between these two, ‘the

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67 Ibid, xii-xiii.
In this light, all the seemingly random tactics and insignificant moments in everyday life that occur around the yard can be understood as the habitus of rural residents, and thus as the embodiment of the idea of self, and they serve as the social tools to interact with and reshape their social and spatial environment. (Fig.94) Therefore, a domestic space that drastically contradicts the existing rural habitus is destructive to the construction of the self and social identity of rural populations. The gorgeous urban-style apartment may in fact socially and culturally impoverish rural inhabitants.

In other words, the nuclear family flat reshapes villagers’ subjectivity. As noted by Bourdieu in his study on Algeria, the modern apartment is ‘a system of demands inscribed in objective space and asking to be fulfilled, a universe strewn with expectations and thereby generating needs and dispositions,’ or in short, the modern apartment ‘demands the behaviour of a modern man.’

In the context of Chinese rural regeneration, the nuclear family flat brings the urban lifestyle to the village, arriving with the myth of the urban good life for a rising middle-class. Ultimately, it is intended to construct the subjects desired by the state, that is, a cheap labour force and a rural consumer class, by reshaping the fine grain of daily household management and social behaviours in village life.

The above prompts the following key question: what is that idea of domestic space truly produced by and how does it constitute the form of life of rural residents? In the context of the missing middle generation in rural families, in a basic sense, dissolving household boundaries are the direct opposite of a domestic realm demarcated or defined by walls and front doors. This is evident in rural villages: houses owned or built by family members within an extended family aggregate in small clusters in adjacent plots. For example, in Shigushan village, Mr Wen’s family built a new house in the 2000s right next to his old house, which was then converted into a space for livestock and storage. A decade later, his son used his earnings from working in cities to build a third house just across the street. Including a nearby fishpond owned by the family.

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70. When it comes to the state apparatus, while changes in social structures and economic forms are more easily associated with large-scale planning, social engineering at the household level appears less aggressive. As what happens at home is often deemed natural and acceptable, housing as a mechanism of social control is toned down. The unspoken consensus, drawing from the over-familiarity and intimacy with the idea and experience of home and family, makes a social construct at the household level particularly powerful and effective.
Mr Wen, the domestic domain of the Wen family is not just confined to their three buildings but the immediate context that these buildings are situated in. (Fig.95) The sphere of this domestic space extends or contracts through daily practices, and thus cannot be defined by physical boundaries. In other words, the three houses are like pebbles dropped in water, and the spreading ripples are their realm of domesticity, which may change depending on subject and time. In contrast to the nuclear family flat as a fixed domain with clear separation between the private and the public, in the rural idea of domesticity, the distinction between what is domestic and what is public is diffuse both in terms of physical space and in people’s perceptions. Rather than focusing on inward subdivisions, it is the relationship between components that essentially constitutes the domestic space, rather than the components themselves. Thus, the idea of domestic space derived from the dissolved household is an elastic form of association, through which the act of mediating between genders, generations, households, neighbours and to an extent the entire village is constantly framed.

Bourdieu states that, ‘social space is an invisible set of relationships which tends to retranslate itself, in a more or less direct manner, into physical space […]’. In turn, the socio-spatial diagram between domestic space and family form reveals that a structured physical space is able to crystallise social space then reinforce or undermine that invisible sets of social relationships. Currently, the spontaneous spatial transformations embodying the dissolved household are largely unconscious and limited by a conventional view of a family house. Therefore, a new model of rural dwelling is needed, one that is able to acknowledge hidden or normalised domestic labour and that provides a new structure to strengthen the vital link in the emerging rural social structure demonstrated by the dissolved household. To put it differently, addressing the ‘ripple effect’ of domesticity is a spatial challenge. Therefore, the question is what kind of spatial structure can mediate the multiple layers of relationships across generations, between family branches and between households, in order to instrumentalise these relationships in the creation of an alternative form of life based on mutual help and immediate care.

There are also cases in other forms. For example, along the main street in Shigushan village, a few houses were built around the 2000s to accommodate more diverse functions in addition to that of a domestic space, such as small shops and mah-jong rooms open to the village. During my visits, I observed that when a few houses of this kind are in close proximity, the street space in front becomes a common living room of the village, where kids play, adults chat and people bring their own stools to sit and eat together. It is evident that there is no distinct separation between the public and the private. Another case in point is the new ancestral temple built on the original site, which provides guest accommodation including a kitchen during the Spring Festival for people originally from the village but who no longer have a house there. The ancestral temple becomes a common house in the village, and sacred space and domestic space merge into one.

71 There are also cases in other forms. For example, along the main street in Shigushan village, a few houses were built around the 2000s to accommodate more diverse functions in addition to that of a domestic space, such as small shops and mah-jong rooms open to the village. During my visits, I observed that when a few houses of this kind are in close proximity, the street space in front becomes a common living room of the village, where kids play, adults chat and people bring their own stools to sit and eat together. It is evident that there is no distinct separation between the public and the private. Another case in point is the new ancestral temple built on the original site, which provides guest accommodation including a kitchen during the Spring Festival for people originally from the village but who no longer have a house there. The ancestral temple becomes a common house in the village, and sacred space and domestic space merge into one.

The previous three sections have discussed the socio-spatial diagrams produced by and productive of current and historical rural dwelling models: from the continued agency of the three-jian principle, to the role of the yard, to naturalised domestic labour, and to the emerging new rural social structure extending beyond the family boundaries. Based on this study of the socio-spatial mechanism in Chinese rural societies, this fourth section uses spatial design to respond to and instrumentalise a set of problems and opportunities the arise from the previous discussions. It explores as a spatial question the concept of domestic space, how inhabitants organise themselves, their daily practices, their subjectivity formed through everyday processes, as well as how different social groups interact and what these interactions produce. This design project especially considers the contemporary phenomenon of the dissolved household in Chinese rural society as a new tendency of change from within and rethinks the three-jian principle in order to develop an alternative rural dwelling model that to that of the nuclear family flat and its social norms, while continuing to think along the line of historical rural dwelling types.

A dissolved household challenges the idea of boundary or enclosure, conceptually and spatially. It is, however, not about having no boundaries, but about the elastic organisation of household management and domestic space. Harking back to the traditional Chinese family, a key structural characteristic is its multi-scalar organisation, which means that several domestic realms coexist, and an individual can belong to several spheres of family depending on different activities and situations. This is a product of, but also results in, the elasticity of social organisations and practices, a fundamental feature of the Chinese society of acquaintances, especially in the rural. This elasticity remains, and the dissolved household is one of its contemporary embodiments. To instrumentalise the elasticity is to instrumentalise sets of relationships derived from family relations but not limited to them, relationships between generations, between family branches, between households and maybe even between local residents and temporary or long-term visitors from cities. The design challenge is thus to create multiple layers of subtle relationships between shared and individual spaces, and to allow these layers to overlap and change throughout the day, the year and even different periods of life. This challenge particularly evokes the instrumentality of jian, which provides a clear spatial structure without functional predetermination, inviting imprints of different daily practices through habitation. I therefore call this a project of jian.

The bright room, according to the original three-jian principle, is the nucleus of family life and represents family unity and wealth. To rethink this in a contemporary context, equivalent spaces in dissolved rural households must be identified. The project takes the yard in modern self-built rural family houses as the basis to redefine the bright room to accommodate a common space for the shared activities of the entire household, especially dining, kitchens for different family branches, and open spaces needed by rural households for drying harvest and storing tools and materials for subsistence production. Following the transverse organisation of the three-jian, two plots for kitchen gardens are arranged on both sides of the redefined bright room both to extend the space and to create a buffer zone between it and the dark rooms, which provide living quarters for different generations in a family. This redefined bright room retains its dominant role in organising daily household activities, but also allows for a new level of independence between generations. (Fig.96)

The spatial mediation of multiple relationships within a household is also social mediation. This reflects the original meaning of jian as an in-between state in space and time. To instrumentalise this idea in the context of today’s dissolved household is to create a domestic space that is responsive to the social roles in, and daily organisation of, a household. In other words, what this redefined three-jian principle provides can be conceptualised as a ‘domestic platform’ that allows its inhabitants to mediate social and spatial organisations, or in other words, calls for alternations and inscriptions that are indispensable to its operation. Simply put, a platform can only be in operation when people act on and through it. Actions are associated with the relationship between sharing and separation, the subtlety of which depends on different ways of how the bright
room and dark rooms are composed, how the in-between kitchen gardens are treated and how the common dining space and separate kitchens are connected. The redefined three-jian principle is thus invested with a socio-political role.

The idea of a domestic platform also means that ‘bright room’ and ‘dark room’ no longer refer to actual rooms but a tentative principle of spatial organisation in rural dwellings. Therefore, the bright room is now neither a room nor a yard but rather a central jian. It may not even be important to state what this space is. What is important is what activities are facilitated here. On my visits to Shigushan village, I have observed dining taking place inside or at the gate of a yard, on the side of a street and even simply under a tree. The three meals of the day, especially dinner, are crucial moments in daily village life. In other words, daily meals are an important habitus of rural residents. Thus, to recognise eating as an activity that can be shared among generations and family branches within a household as well as beyond, a common space for dining in the bright room is created for inhabitants to come together and share a moment. The other essential daily activity is cooking. In contrast to the introduction of a shared dining space, the project acknowledges the need for different family branches or generations to have separate kitchens. Having a separate kitchen supports the relative independence of each family branch in terms of how they organise their day and financial management. It thus, the bright room should allow for several kitchens. To place the kitchen in this central jian, rather than at the back of the house as in a traditional courtyard house, or in a corner of the yard as in contemporary self-built rural family houses, acknowledges and emphasises the importance of domestic labour. To further support domestic labour, a minor but crucial spatial detail is proposed: connecting all kitchens to the common space and keeping the interface between them open. In this way, cooking activities, rather than being kept apart and hidden, become integrated with the common space and core domestic realm. To invert this conventionally segregated, ancillary space is to not only give importance to domestic labour but also to enable inhabitants to provide mutual help and establish social connections. In fact, this argument can be extended to the proposed arrangement of kitchen gardens. As an extension of the bright room, kitchen gardens bring subsistence production to the foreground, reinforcing the productive aspect of a rural household. In this way, the productive landscape becomes a structural element.
The new bright room highlights selected moments in rural daily life, i.e. dining, cooking and kitchen gardening, and intensifies their role in creating and reconfirming connections between family members, close neighbours and fellow villagers by providing a spatial structure to these practices. (Fig.97)

To create an adaptive spatial framework for the domestic platform, the project proposes a coordinated structural system as ground zero. This system consists of a generic grid that regulates the layout of rooms and plot size for each household, and a column system for the bright room and a sequence of load-bearing walls for dark rooms. (Fig.96) The differentiation between structural systems for the bright room and dark rooms reflects and allows for the different levels of subdivision needed in these two types of space. As a principle, structural units defined by columns in the bright room should remain as connected as possible, which is crucial to integrating the activities facilitated by this space, while dark rooms can be relatively more fixed domains.

The extent to which subdivisions are used can be determined by the needs of each household. Specifically, the two dark rooms can have distinct rhythms of division to accommodate individual living quarters for different generations with varying spatial demands. While the older generation may require no further division apart from the two sides of the plot boundary, adult children may need subdivisions to demarcate each family branch. Outlined above are the spatial principles of one plot or living unit, therefore one household. When several units come together, a small cluster is formed.

The modularity of a living unit creates a large three-jian room at the neighbourhood scale, with a continuous field in the middle defined by a regular column grid that forms the bright room. (Fig.98) When different households install their common spaces and kitchens, the column system allows them to decide on the spatial and social relationships with their neighbours and family branches. A shared roof or a flexible partition can be the starting point to share certain moments in everyday life and thus establish social, shared activities.

The bright room as the common space for shared activities of the entire household.

Dark rooms as individual living quarters for different generations.

The overall plot size varies depending on the registration status of each branch within a family in accordance with the rural land system and hukou system. Every registered rural household in China is entitled to the use right of a house site no larger than 140 m². Though physically living together, different family branches may be registered as different households in the hukou system. Therefore, following the current system, the overall plot size is extended to be 140 m² times the number of registered households. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, I refer to all family members living together as one household.

Fig.97 Household Framework - The Socio-Spatial Diagram for a Unit

24 To put it differently, placing the kitchen garden between the bright room and dark rooms, rather than positioning it as a supplementary space to the main building, weaves together built structures and productive landscapes.

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A Column System

Load-Bearing Walls

Rules:
A generic grid that regulates the layout of rooms and plot size for each household;
A column system for the bright room;
And a sequence of load-bearing walls for dark rooms.
tips or keeping an eye on a neighbour’s chickens and geese, sharing a meal with neighbours, supervising a group of children, looking after the elderly when their own children are away and even helping in the preparation of important events such as weddings and funerals. As the old Chinese saying goes, ‘a close neighbour is better than a distant relative’. To encourage these casual daily interactions is to reinforce the establishment of a network of mutual help and immediate care, which is already emerging in dissolved rural households. A similar intent lies behind dark rooms. For example, the elderly generation can have a shared common space under the eaves by setting the partition walls of their living quarters further back. This grey space between the interior and exterior encourages the custom of dropping-in, which is still very common in rural areas, especially among the elderly. Moreover, this common space allows the elderly generation to form relationships with a larger collective that is not based on kinship, while simultaneously maintaining a connection with their own families. To put it in another way, for the elderly generation, the dark room assumes the functions of a residential care home embedded in a cluster of family units. Care for the elderly is reintroduced as a collective responsibility within a close neighbourhood. Thus, this large three-jian structure at the neighbourhood level provides the spatial and social infrastructure required to establish a network of support, derived from but not limited to family relations.

The project of jian develops the elastic idea of organisation in household management and domestic space within the context of the contemporary dissolved household. It provides inhabitants with choices on how to form socio-spatial relationships within and between households, or simply, how to live together with family members and neighbours. As a spatial strategy, the project of jian instrumentalises a shared knowledge of rural dwelling formed and evolved through historical models in order to transform a domestic space into a domestic platform, and thereby challenges the nuclear family flat that contains intentions largely predetermined by social norms designed to facilitate a market-centric society. As a social project, it emphasises the mechanisms essential to the formation of rural daily practices. In this way, the vital link, built upon non-market relations between family branches to extended family, the immediate neighbourhood and the village community is reinforced, and the emerging new rural social structure enhanced.

The project of jian is thus a project of care and rebellion.

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26 In fact, this space under the eaves is a common feature in traditional courtyard houses due to their extended roofs and column structure, which creates a grey space between the interior and exterior.

77 When I visited Shiguan village, I saw villagers sitting at the gate of their yard and casually starting conversations with people who were passing by.
The design scenarios developed show how the organisational principles proposed could work for different household compositions and suggests rules to be followed and areas of flexibility.

The cluster plan demonstrates how four households can live together. The composition of the bright rooms reflects the social relationships among them, which might transform over time as relations as well as household compositions change. As a general principle, spatial organisation should first be determined by the structural system, the column system for the bright room and the sequence of load-bearing walls for the dark rooms, second, by the roof and, lastly, by partitions. This instrumentalises the original meaning of jian as a construction module found in traditional Chinese courtyard houses. In construction terms, the structural system (columns and load-bearing walls) can be erected by the village collective. In this case, the roof construction should be discussed among close neighbours to create a coherent system, especially for the dark rooms of the elderly generation. This creates a sense of unity in the cluster. Finally, partitions within each household’s bright room and dark rooms can be determined by different demands. Nevertheless, flexible partitions in the bright room are encouraged to allow for changing short-term and long-term needs.

Apart from this scenario, which imagines this model as a complete new build, an additional one is developed in the context of Shigushan village. This contextualised scenario demonstrates how the new three-jian principle can be applied using only part of its spatial elements to integrate existing rural houses without undermining the integrity of the principle idea. Shigushan village has mixed housing stock: while a large portion of commune housing units are currently abandoned, new self-built rural family houses have sprung up with some loosely located around the commune housing and some built on original sites where dilapidated commune housing units were demolished. Responding to this situation, the project installs new units connected to certain existing houses in a row, together forming the dark rooms, and creates the bright room in the left-over space between these houses. As the kitchen gardens between the bright room and dark rooms are a flexible buffer zone, they can be adjusted to fit different sizes of left-over space. A new three-jian structure is thus formed. This type of implementation confirms that the project of jian is essentially a typological socio-spatial framework.

Last but not least, at the scale of the full Shigushan village settlement, the project also demonstrates a series of points where both complete three-jian structures and partial ones integrated with existing houses can be installed, augmenting the spatial frame developed at the community level. Thus, an interwoven settlement fabric is formed with new seeds embedded and ready to sprout and grow.
Household Structure A:
Grandparents live in the village.
One couple: both husband and wife work in the nearby town centre and go home to their village at the weekend.

Unit Type A:
One family kitchen is shared across generations. The middle generation has its own quarter as a weekend house.

Household Scenario A - Socio-Spatial Diagram

Household Scenario A - Plan

Grid: 3m x 3m
Household Structure B:
Grandparents live in the village.
One couple: husband works in the city, wife stays in the village and takes care of their child and parents.
One child.

Unit Type B:
The dark room for the middle generation allows for a temporary storage space and an extension to be added later, for example, when the child grows up and gets married. This is thus an incremental unit type.
Household Structure C (Liu Brothers’ Household):
Grandparents live in the village.
Two couples, both husbands work in the city while their wives stay in the village and take care of their children and parents.
Three children.

Grid: 3m x 3m

Unit Type C:
The dark room for the couple’s families consists of two living areas with a shared small yard, which can be a playground for the children or a temporary storage space.
The dark room for the older generation includes a space for storage.
Household D:

- Grandparents live in the village.
- Two couples: in one, both husband and wife work in the city and only visit the village a few times a year, in the other, the husband works in the city and the wife stays behind in the village.
- One teenage child and one adult, married child.

Unit Type D:
The married child has his/her own living area and shares a small yard with his/her parents and sibling.
The dark room for the elderly generation includes an extra sleeping space for the couple who only come back a few times a year.
Household Scenarios D - Systems of Structure, Roof and Partition
In this scenario, if the two households choose to engage in a higher level of sharing between them, they can simply install a flexible partition between their common spaces, for example, a sliding door. This simple change reorganizes how functions are distributed in their respective common spaces. For example, they can place their dinner tables closer to this flexible partition to allow for shared dinners, while spaces further within their household domains can be used for receiving guests, which is a more independent activity.
Since the grandparents in household A live alone in the village most of the time, they might develop a close relationship with their neighbour, household D. In this case, grandparents A may choose to install their kitchen and common space next to those of grandparents D so they can socialise and share meals. To this end, part of the common space of household D is transformed into a shared space across two households.
Housing Unit Scenario:
Bright Rooms: Household D + A; Dark Rooms: Household D
Cluster Scenario: Integrated with Existing Houses in Shiguashan Village - Roof Plan

Cluster Scenario: Integrated with Existing Houses in Shiguashan Village - Ground Floor Plan
Housing Cluster Scenario in Shigushan Village:
One new build and one integrated with an existing self-built family house and an existing commune housing row.
Scenarios of Complete and Partial Implementations of the Project of Jian

Two Natural Villages, Shiguahan Village
Design disciplines in China have not thought or talked about rural spatial practices until the recent 10 years. Coming into effect in 2008, the new Urban and Rural Planning Law that established rural planning as a distinct planning category for the first time marked a significant legal acknowledgment of the rural. However, as discussed, the legal recognition of rural planning in China does not mean yet that, in practice as well as in design culture, the distinct needs of the rural territory are recognised or acknowledged as being different from those of cities and addressed in the planning process. While rural architecture has gradually become one of the hottest topics in the field of architecture in China,1 there is a particular type of debate that dominates the discussion. It is against this backdrop that this thesis is to make a timely contribution.

It is against this backdrop that this thesis is to make a timely contribution. Rurality is an elastic form of association, both socially and spatially, across the levels of territory, settlement and household. Based on this, the thesis advocates a shift in design thinking for the rural and proposes the linking of planning, urban design and architecture, which are still often seen as separate design disciplines. Rurality demands that the spatial practices see the subject of design as a territory, regardless of scale (either a town, a village or a house), which is never crystallised and is always being constructed and reconstructed by various constitutive forces. It also demands that the agency of design be understood ultimately as a way to reshape social relationships. On the one hand, in the most direct sense, different types of territorial, settlement and domestic plans are needed, ones that are not created for concentrated built environments, but instead emphasise the interrelationship between components. On the other, this also means that the design process should not be carried out following a hierarchical manner – from planning to urban design to architecture, with each level isolated – but should rather operate within a cross-scalar framework that allows planning, urban design and architecture to constantly interact with, acknowledge and anticipate one another.2 These three should be therefore understood as one synthetic design discipline. The mission of this, at least in the rural context, is to give form to the ‘field’ (as defined by Bourdieu), to make it explicit, legible and thus exposed. In this way, it creates opportunities of change in the recognised and established field of power and is in this sense political.

Furthermore, apart from an alternative multi-scalar model for China’s rural regeneration, rurality also requires a rethinking of development as a socio-cultural process. More exactly, social problems that are pressing in the rural society, such as inequality, welfare and service provision, and different forms of cultural practice of the rural inhabitants, including lifestyle, identity, mentality and aspiration among others, must be recognised by the state, local governments and the design profession in order to actively integrate them into the process of rural regeneration. To this end, the spatial, social and cultural history and transformations of and emerging tendencies in rural China examined in this thesis are of great importance to a larger economic and political debate, in order to transcend the conceptual limitations of the current socio-spatial strategies of rural regeneration. At the moment, these issues are raised by the thesis mainly at a theoretical and speculative design level. A next step towards reshaping the current rural discourse in practice would be to directly engage with policymakers. In fact, as part of my work developed in parallel with my PhD research, I worked with the local government of Hongmei sub-district in Shanghai in 2017 on an inter-disciplinary forum for urban design in China. During the collaboration I observed a growing awareness and interest in finding alternative forms of community organisation. This thesis contributes to this urgent discussion between local governments, residents and architects or planners.

1 This increasing interest in the rural is not confined to China. Globally, for example, Rem Koolhaas’ publicly declared his shift of attention to the countryside in 2012. The outcomes of his research have not yet been fully revealed. In terms of inheritance, Koolhaas largely focuses on the rapid-changing structure of rural populations, the socio-spatial alterations caused by the increasing demands of tourism and transformations in rural life brought about by new technologies. See for example Koolhaas’ lecture entitled ‘Countryside’ delivered at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 25 April 2012.


3 In this series, even though the thesis is organised following the territory-settlement-household structure, it does not mean that the territory is the starting point and the household the ending point or vice versa.
relationships that underpin the emergence of the dissolved household, which is in essence a support system. In fact, when cities confront the increasing need of people to seek support outside the family structure, such as younger generations who opt to co-habit with non-relatives or the growing aging population that lacks sufficient support from their families, a support system based on associational relationships is much needed. The associational relationship is a concrete social institution derived from a socio-cultural history dating back to China’s collectivisation era of the rural people’s commune and the urban danwei, and further back still to the country’s 5,000 years of agricultural history. It thus embodies a rooted cultural unity that transcends different economic forms. Even when this type of relationship becomes difficult to directly observe, it can still be identified through the spatial forms they have produced, a reading this thesis has developed. Therefore, as discussed, since the departure from a collective form of living to a modern lifestyle first occurred in the urban, coinciding with the socio-economic and cultural break-down of the danwei system, it might be now time for the urban to learn from the rural.

Opportunities to develop this new debate on a re-conceptualised rural are rapidly growing. In 2015 and 2016, I collaborated with Beijing Design Week, a leading international design platform in China jointly initiated by three ministries of the PRC, the Ministries of Education, Science and Technology, and Culture, together with the Government of Beijing Municipality. This state-initiated design platform has a relatively open attitude to explorations of different forms of public services in relation to urban communities. For the government, building or facilitating a self-organised support system is an important release to the pressure on public service provision. One can therefore argue that the model of an elastic form of association is of growing importance to the discussions around building social and communal relationships outside the traditional family, especially in regards to intergenerational communities and the work-life-education integration. While the levels of openness and awareness of local governments vary a great deal in China, with Shanghai and Beijing relatively advanced, there is an emerging context in which I can test and extend my arguments presented in this thesis: rurality, or an elastic form of association, transcends the simple divide between urban and rural development by providing a distinct form of living arrangement and social organisation. In this sense, rurality is ultimately about how people organise themselves and associate with others.


Huang, Philip C.C., Gaiz Yuan and Yusheng Peng, “Capitalization without Proletarianization in China’s Agricultural Development.” Modern China 38, no.2 (2012): 139-173.


