For the first time in history, more Chinese people now live in towns and cities than in rural villages. Reaching 51% in 2011, urbanisation in China is accelerating. Convinced that this holds the key to the country’s ongoing social and economic development, China’s leaders recently announced an urbanisation target of 70% (approximately 900 million people) by 2025. However, leaders including Premier Li Keqiang have emphasised that future urbanisation would be characterised not by an expansion of megacities (都市化), but by growth in rural towns and small cities (城镇化). The Party is essentially seeking to take the cities to the rural populace rather than bring the rural populace to the cities. Following the policy announcement at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, a group of national ministries has been tasked with developing guidelines for promoting the urbanisation of rural China.

In reality, this understudied dimension of China’s urbanisation has been underway for some time. Following the industrialisation of many rural areas along the coast and within distance of cities, many “villages” have grown to accommodate 30,000 or more workers. Today many of these villages, especially in the Pearl River Delta, have become urban-like nodes in an ever-widening urban sprawl. Even in China’s agricultural heartland, vast numbers of county towns are becoming small cities, a process accelerated by the increasing concentration of public services in county towns and the expansion of industry in China’s inland provinces. In a separate thrust, in much of China, under the auspices of the Building a New Socialist Countryside programme that began in 2006, government policies are encouraging whole villages to demolish their current housing and to move into communities of high-density townhouses, sometimes merging several villages in order to provide supermarkets, libraries, etc., in a replication of urban life. All of these forms of onrushing urbanisation are reshaping rural China—its landscape, culture, and social structures.

The articles in this issue examine these diverse changes. The papers derive from a workshop (1) that we organised in 2012 in Yunnan, at which the papers were discussed and critiqued, and subsequently were revised with our editorial input. Valuable additional editorial suggestions have been provided by external referees and the editors of China Perspectives.

The first three papers by Andrew Kipnis, Ben Hillman, and Tom Cliff are case studies of different types of county towns that have rapidly become cities. Andrew Kipnis’ paper explores urban-rural integration in a prosperous rural city in Shandong Province. Tom Cliff examines the Chinese visions underpinning city planning and the impact of urbanisation on local culture and ethnic relations in a small city in Xinjiang. Ben Hillman’s case study of a rapidly growing county capital in northwest Yunnan explores the impact of its expansion and explains how, in the absence of effective education and employment policies, urbanisation can lead to the economic marginalisation of ethnic minorities.

The next paper examines a largely unknown but widespread type of urbanisation. Him Chung and Jonathan Unger present case studies of four villages in Guangdong that have urbanised while retaining control of their land and converting the village collectives into property companies. This stands in contrast to the most widely known form of urbanisation in rural China, which involves the forced acquisition of farmland by the local state before its conversion for commercial or industrial development.

A third set of papers examines in situ rural urbanisation, in which villages in the countryside increasingly resemble the urban environment. A paper by Yu Zhu, Min Lin, Liyue Lin, and Jinmei Chen uses recent data to examine the extent of this process from a provincial perspective. David Bray’s paper examines the policies and thinking behind the state’s use of urban planning to remake villages in the national Building a New Socialist Countryside programme, and he illustrates this through case studies. In a related paper, Lior Rosenberg uses comparative case studies from a richer and a poorer province to examine different local government approaches to reconstructing villages in this programme.

By examining the different ways rural China is being reshaped and urbanised, this special issue provides new insights into one of the most dramatic and important transformations now underway in China.

1. The Building of a New Socialist Countryside programme is very broad-based and includes abolition of China’s agricultural tax; abolition of all rural school fees up through grade 9, with free textbooks provided to poor students; a nationwide subsidised rural health insurance program; subsidies to farmers for their acreage of grain crops; massive rural road paving; as well as reconstruction of villages. History may well record the BNSC as the major achievement of the Hu-Wen leadership.
2. The workshop was funded by the Australian National University’s Centre on China in the World, for which we express appreciation.
N° 102 - Juillet/Août 2013 - L’ordre et le chaos

- La tolérance au chaos : un facteur d’efficacité ?
  Vincent DESPORTES, Amar DRISSI
  Les jardins à la française ont marqué notre imaginaire dans les organisations, un effort de quadrillage était sans cesse renouvelé. Mais quand tout bouge, cette obsession est vainque et la tolérance au chaos devient un facteur d’efficacité.

- Comment être petit et conquérir le monde : l’aventure de Clextral
  Georges JOBARD
  Clextral a fondé son développement sur l’extraction blinis, qui lui permet d’équiper les fabricants de cornflakes aussi bien que de billets de banque, et dont elle est leader mondial. Avec 275 salariés, elle vend dans 88 pays et gère 12 langues.

- 1001 fontaines pour demain : pour une nouvelle économie de l’eau potable
  Jean-François RAMBICUR, François JACQUENAUD
  Trois personnes créent au Cambodge un dispositif permettant aux populations isolées de satisfaire leurs besoins en eau de boisson pour un investissement de moins de 60 euros par bénéficiaire. Ayant fait ses preuves, le projet se diffuse régulièrement.

- EADS Innovation Nursery : faire mûrir les initiatives innovantes
  Ulrike STEINHORST, Patrice COMMIN
  L’Innovation Nursery d’EADS accompagne des initiatives innovantes intéressantes, mais qui ne peuvent pas être portées par les unités opérationnelles. L’équipe d’animation mobilise dans le Groupe les compétences indispensables à la réussite du projet.

- Le défi d’un nouvel acteur privé : fluidifier le trafic aérien
  Eric STEFANELLO
  Jusqu’à quatre mille cinq cents avions simultanément présents dans le ciel européen, et tous en concurrence pour atteindre ou décoller au même moment aux mêmes endroits ! Comment assurer la sécurité et la rentabilité d’un système proche de la saturation ?

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Urbanisation in Between:

Rural traces in a rapidly growing and industrialising county city

ANDREW B. KIPNIS

ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the lived experiences of people who have moved to Zouping, a rapidly urbanising city in Shandong Province. It argues that the variety of their experiences reveals much about Chinese processes of urbanisation. Recent writing on Chinese urbanisation often portrays a sharp social break with rural experience. This article discusses the variable degrees of continuity with rural pasts that different groups of new urbanites experience. It presents Zouping as an intermediate case of Chinese urbanisation, illustrating aspects of both migrant and in situ development, and also argues for the importance of attention to divergent examples of lived experiences, which often blend or transcend the ideal types presented in models of urban experience.

KEYWORDS: urbanisation, industrialisation, social embeddedness, lived experience, family forms.

Modernisation theory emphasises the discontinuities of lived experience that occur under processes of capitalist urbanisation – the abrupt shifts in kinship practice, orientation towards community, and ways of life that urbanisation is said to bring about, giving rise to individualism, cosmopolitanism, and sometimes social alienation. (1) Contemporary Chinese urbanisation is taking place at breakneck speed, and most recent sociological and anthropological studies of this urbanisation have been emphasising themes that resonate with this classic literature, such as the growth of individualism or the spread of anomie and alienation. Xin Liu, for example, writes about anomie in the lives of contemporary urban Chinese businessmen, (2) while a number of authors have stressed how contemporary Chinese society emphasises the individual. (3) Much of the research on such themes has taken place in China’s largest urban areas, where vast waves of immigrants and migrant workers have left their village homes and some of their rural norms.

In sharp contrast, the emphasis in earlier writings on Chinese urbanisation focused on how China provided an alternative model to Western capitalist urbanisation. Martin Whyte and William Parish suggested that the urbanisation that occurred under the Mao-era planned economy, shaped by the interlinked systems of household registration (hukou), work units (danwei), and neighbourhood committees (jiewei), took a different shape to the urbanisation that had occurred in Western countries. Families and neighbourhood communities remained close-knit, they argued, while crime, drug addiction, and prostitution seemed rare, and slums or shantytowns were non-existent. Everyone and everything within the urban domains that they depicted appeared to be heavily regulated and tightly governed. (4)

During the 1980s and 1990s, many authors wrote of the in situ industrialisation and modernisation (without urbanisation) that took place in post-Mao China with the development of township and village enterprises (TVEs) under the “litu bulixiang” (leave the soil but not the rural vicinity) model. Greg Guldin called this China’s “rural urbanisation.” (5) As the prominence of township and village industry faded during the late 1990s, the China studies field as a whole began to focus more sharply on large urban areas and processes of alienation and individuation, as depicted above. In this article, I offer a middle pathway between contemporary studies of urban China that are stimulated by themes from classic modernisation theory and earlier studies that saw China as representing an alternative model of urbanisation.

I focus on Zouping, a Shandong county capital whose population has grown from about 20,000 to more than 300,000 during the past three decades. As Beatriz Carrillo argues, the urbanisation that occurs in mid-sized metropolises has been an understudied phenomenon over the past decade or so. She notes that the new residents of county capitals and mid-sized cities often come from the nearby surrounding countryside, and thus are less dis-embedded from their “rural roots” than migrants to the Pearl River Delta or to large eastern metropolises such as Beijing, Shanghai, Wenzhou, or Nanjing. (6) Zouping in some respects resembles the Shanxi county town described by Carrillo in that much of Zouping’s growth stems from local migration, but Zouping is large enough to recruit migrants from further away as well. Among the local migrants and the original populace of Zouping, there is a continuing sense of embeddedness. But alienation, the expansion of social horizons, and other social processes associated with classic modernisation theory are also apparent. The contribution of this article is to insist upon the side-by-side nature of these processes.

1. For a summary of such theory, see Michael P. Smith, The City and Social Theory, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1979.
The physical, cultural, and consumer expansion of Zouping

During the 1990s, Zouping City grew gradually towards the north and west. But explosive growth really began after 2000, when an urban-planning specialist from Shanghai’s Tongji University was invited to draw up a new plan. County leaders decided to build a “new city district” (xīn chéngqu) south of a superhighway that had been built in 1995 to link the two major Shandong cities of Jinan and Qingdao, and to create an industrial “development zone” (kaifǎqù) east of the old city. Construction on the new districts began in 2001, and by 2004 both had begun to take shape. The original plan for the industrial development zone entailed an additional 4.3 square kilometres of urban space, including residential areas, but the zone has been so successful that it has continued to grow and by 2010 surpassed 10 square kilometres. The new city district has likewise exceeded its originally planned size. The growth of the Weiqiao Group (Weiqiao Chuangye jítuan), a conglomerate producing textiles, aluminium, and electricity, has provided much of the economic basis for Zouping’s growth. In 2009 it contributed 60% of the county’s industrial tax revenue and employed more than 100,000 workers.

The movement of the county government (including the housing for officials and their families) from its previous headquarters in the centre of the old city created space in the old city for the construction of several large shopping malls and adjacent apartment buildings, turning it into a vibrant commercial district. The construction of the new city district and the expansion and revitalisation of the old city have been relatively well planned, and a pleasurable mixture of parks and public facilities, stores, shopping malls and street vendors, schools, residential buildings, and restaurants has emerged. The development zone is more polluted and has fewer parks and public spaces, but has a fair number of schools and food shopping options along with two shopping malls. A new convenient set of seven bus routes links the three parts of the city.

Alongside the growth of employment opportunities spurred by the Weiqiao industrial conglomerate and the physical growth of the urban built area has come a rapid growth in consumer spending and lifestyle changes that especially affect the young and relatively well-off. Eating habits, for example, have become more sophisticated. Rather than using the still existing but noticeably run-down outdoor markets, patrons entertain one another at karaoke clubs and bars into the wee hours of the morning, especially in the “all-night district” (búyuè chéng) of the new city district. The development zone contains roller-skating rinks, Internet bars, and pool halls catering to single migrant workers. In many parts of the city the atmosphere is “hot and noisy” (renào), to use the Chinese phrase for lively, festive places.

The types and breadth of consumption in Zouping reflect a felt shift in local perspectives toward a national focus. That is to say, people pay extra to consume the food of other parts of the country, take trips to other parts of the country, educate their children in preparation for the national university entrance exam, and come to imagine their futures in terms of urban and new national lifestyles. This outreach does not entail a repudiation of the local, however. As Zouping has prospered, this has been accompanied by a new sense of local pride. Even as young people learn how to speak Mandarin in a more standard national way, pride in the local dialect is being reasserted, and local identities—notions of being a bendèn, a native resident—are becoming more important. Moreover, the attractiveness of a “hot and noisy” atmosphere and country-style restaurants can be seen as tastes reflecting an ongoing rural habitus.

In short, as much as Zouping’s in-migration and urban lifestyle can be seen as taking people away from their families and out of the local community, they also are involved in the re-production of families and the reassertion of community. This same local/non-local dynamic applies to urbanisation’s usual twin: industrialisation.

The economic roots of Zouping’s growth

The Weiqiao industrial conglomerate had previously been headquartered in the town of Weiqiao, which is in the northwestern part of the county, roughly 30 kilometres from the county capital, where it retains some of its cloth production. After the opening of the development zone, most of its facilities were relocated to the county capital, where the company became a magnet for employment. The history of this corporate group demonstrates the relatively indigenous and organic nature of industrial development in Zouping. It began as a collectively-owned enterprise in a village near Weiqiao during the 1980s. In that period there were literally hundreds of similar small-scale publicly-owned rural township and village enterprises (TVEs) scattered across the 800 or so villages of the county. Zouping County had long been a cotton growing region, and cotton spinning and cloth man-

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ufacture were the first industries attempted by the village government entrepreneurs who emerged during that period. Weiqiao’s founder and current CEO, Zhang Shiping, proved quite resourceful in hiring outside experts to overcome production difficulties, and gradually out-competed all of the other cloth-producing TVEs in the county. Almost all of these TVEs went bankrupt, and the county government threw its support behind this winner. As Zouping was a large agricultural county, Zhang believed that it had a nearly endless supply of labourers happy to work in cloth factories. Although he could be a ruthless businessman, and although he amassed a personal fortune when the business was privatised with his family members as the leading shareholders, his dedication to providing employment to Zouping residents and the moral capital this commitment gave him in his dealings with the county government can be seen in the Group’s title, which literally translates as The Weiqiao Employment Creation Group.

The fact that Weiqiao was based on the idea of providing employment for workers from the surrounding area rather than exploiting migrant labourers from far afield has given Weiqiao a more humane feel than many of the factories in South China’s Pearl River Delta. While work in Weiqiao is strenuous for its contract (hetong relatively permanent) workers, the pay is reasonable and the benefits are many. For the unmarried, there are free dormitory beds in rooms with heating during the winter and (since 2008) air conditioning in the summer. There are more than 20,000 subsidised apartments for sale to married contract workers, and these come with heavily discounted utilities and nice recreational facilities. There are numerous other minor benefits that make Weiqiao seem more like a socialist-era work unit (danwei) than a typical twenty-first century Chinese factory. In addition, the Weiqiao Group gave the county education bureau the money to build two completely new schools in the development zone near the company’s housing compounds. These schools have truly excellent facilities and are attended primarily by the children of factory workers and of families from the villages whose land was requisitioned to build the industrial zone. Some workers say that the reason they chose to work at Weiqiao is because of the quality of the schools available to their children.

Though the second largest business group in Zouping County is considerably smaller, its history is quite similar. The Xiwang Group is headquartered in Handian, a town just north of the county seat. As a result of its success, along with the expansion of the old city, Handian and Zouping City have now become one contiguous urban area, and there is even a city bus route that takes many workers from Zouping City to their jobs at Xiwang. Xiwang also started as a TVE but it specialised in making corn oil, cornstarch, and other minor benefits that make Weiqiao seem more like a socialist-era work unit (danwei) than a typical twenty-first century Chinese factory. In addition, the Weiqiao Group gave the county education bureau the money to build two completely new schools in the development zone near the company’s housing compounds. These schools have truly excellent facilities and are attended primarily by the children of factory workers and of families from the villages whose land was requisitioned to build the industrial zone. Some workers say that the reason they chose to work at Weiqiao is because of the quality of the schools available to their children.

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But understanding Zouping as an alternative to typical capitalist (and much of China’s current) urbanisation is too simple. Despite the work-unit like employment opportunities and the local origins of many of the workers and of the industries themselves, some aspects of Zouping’s development resemble the exploitative patterns of work that emerged in the Pearl River Delta. Weiqiao in particular employs a large number of migrant workers from outside of Zouping and Shandong. Many of these are “temporary” (lingshi) rather than “contract” (hetong) workers. They are not eligible to purchase work unit housing and often end up renting shabby rooms in the still-existing villages on the outskirts of the development zone, which have grown into high-density, unsanitary shanty-towns. As in many parts of China, Zouping residents who do not work at Weiqiao and who live away from the development zone often give voice to prejudicial sentiments about migrant workers being people of low “quality” (suzhi) and having criminal tendencies. Among local people, there is also a growing disdain for factory work. I have spoken to many young people from Zouping who complain that labouring at Weiqiao is too hard and bitter and that they would much rather accept a lower paying, less permanent job in the service sector, though there are still Zouping residents entering the factories. As in the Pearl River Delta, some of the villages whose land lies next to the factory zone have become relatively wealthy, and there is a noticeable divide between these local villages and outside migrants in terms of wealth if not in terms of education levels and social outlook. This divide, however, has not reached the extremes in the Pearl River Delta described by Chan, Madsen, and Unger. In short, while it would be inaccurate to say that the divide between migrants and locals maps directly onto the divide between Weiqiao factory workers and those who work in other vocations, it would also be wrong to say that anti-migrant prejudice is absent or that locals do not try to distinguish themselves from migrants by finding work outside of the hardest, most exploitative forms of industrial production.

Whereas Zouping’s industry was earlier based on local agricultural inputs, the industrial activities of Weiqiao and Xiwang are increasingly driven by a search for high profit margins rather than the ability to locally source agricultural products. In fact, with the further development of Zouping’s and China’s transport system, Weiqiao has stopped sourcing its cotton locally, obtaining most of it from Xinjiang. The county government has encouraged Weiqiao (along with a few other local corporations) to go into aluminium refining because it is an industry that offers relatively high profit margins (if one accepts the high levels of air pollution and accident risk that come with it). While most of Weiqiao’s workers remain in cloth production, more and more of its profits are coming from aluminium refining.

Lived experiences

The diverse outcomes of urbanisation and industrialisation in Zouping can be illuminated through a series of family portraits of Zouping residents in the midst of a transition from non-industrial and rural backgrounds to an urban setting: long-term contract workers, migrant workers, people who profit as landowners in Zouping’s “villages in the city” (chengzhongcun), youths who refuse to work at Weiqiao, and youths who hope to work there. Interviews with more than 250 individual residents or households reveal
that each of the households or people that I will depict here is typical of a significant subsector of this population. These portraits enable us to glimpse the ways that lived experiences bridge or do not bridge the rural/urban and the alienated individual/embedded familial divides.

**Long-term contract workers**

I have spent a considerable amount of time at the schools near Weiqiao’s married housing compounds and have had the opportunity to interview three dozen families who live there. Because buying a house in the factory’s compound requires contract-worker status, and because the act of buying the house itself indicates a relatively high degree of commitment to and trust in Weiqiao, the workers in this housing tend to have worked at Weiqiao for a number of years and to come from villages within Zouping County, and plan on spending the rest of their lives working for the company. They are largely satisfied with their jobs and scoff at young people who complain that work in the factory is too bitter. Other long-term contract workers have chosen either to purchase housing on the open market or to live in their village homes and commute daily rather than purchase the subsidised Weiqiao housing (which must be sold back to Weiqiao at its purchase price when the worker dies or leaves Zouping). In either case, most contract-worker families live lives that complicate the rural-urban divide and that go against notions that urbanisation gives rise to individualism, the demise of extended families, and dis-embedding from local communities.

**Contract worker family A:** This married couple came from villages in Matou (a township adjacent to Weiqiao), where they were born in the late 1970s. The wife began working in cotton spinning in 1992 back in Weiqiao Township after graduating from junior middle school. The husband joined the army in 1994, but came back to the village and began working in Weiqiao in cloth manufacturing in 1998. They knew each other in junior middle school, but were reintroduced at a factory dance and married in 2000. Their only son was nine at the time of my interview in 2011. They were ordered to move to Zouping City by the company in 2005. They were originally reluctant, because the company housing was more expensive in the county capital than in Weiqiao, and they lost a bit of money through buying and selling their company apartments, but now they are glad they did because the schools are better in Zouping. The wife works rotating shifts (lunban), six eight-hour shifts per week including day, evening, and night shifts and earns 2,800 yuan per month, while the husband works five day shifts a week (changbaiban) and earns 2,400 a month. The paternal grandparents take turns living with them and taking care of their son. The grandparents not with them live back in the Matou village where there are many relatives and do a bit of farming. The husband also sometimes goes back to the village on the weekend, about a 50-minute drive, to help his parents with farming their land (only the two grandparents still have land rights). The wife visits her own natal family back in her Matou village at least once a month. They own a car and a motorbike and have taken vacations to the ocean in Qingdao. Their son attends after school homework classes and the parents hope he can attend university. While consumption and education expand this family’s horizons well beyond the local level, tight links to extended family members and village farming ensure their continuing embeddedness in the local community.

**Contract worker family B:** The six members of this family (paternal grandfather, paternal grandmother, husband, wife, elder daughter, younger son) live in a village about a 15-minute motorcycle ride away from the county capital. The husband is a long-term contract worker in cotton spinning. Because he is adept in machine repair and works rotating shifts, he earns over 3,000 yuan a month. He sometimes sleeps in one of the dormitory rooms where he has reserved a bed (at no charge to him), but only if time between shifts is tight or if he has business that keeps him in town. Otherwise he goes back to his village home every night. His wife and mother farm the land and the kids go to primary school (and kindergarten) in their township. Grandfather sometimes farms and sometimes does some ‘small business’ (maimai). They own a car and a motorcycle, and have taken vacations in Qingdao and Beijing. Going to the local school ensures a higher degree of continuing embeddedness than in the first case, and this household has all three generations living under one roof.

**Migrant workers**

The situations and attitudes of migrant workers are much more diverse than those of the long-term contract workers of local origin. While some migrants manage to become contract workers, they live too far from their rural homes to also be part-time farmers, and hardly ever live in three-generation households. Because of the schools, many married workers bring their children with them, but hardly any bring their aging parents. Most return to their original homes only once or twice a year. Their attitudes towards Weiqiao and Zouping vary. Some like the place and the company and hope to move there permanently, others dislike both and are looking to leave, while some see Zouping as a reasonable but temporary home.

**Migrant worker family A:** This family of three (husband, wife, 11-year-old son in 2010) came to Zouping from a poor rural area in Gansu Province in 2008. The husband went to a technical school (zhong zhuang) and is an electrician. They came to Zouping because of his younger brother, who had gone to university, graduated in engineering, entered mid-level management in Weiqiao, and married a local Zouping woman who is a teacher. When the older brother and his family first arrived in Zouping he worked as an electrician repairing faults in one of Weiqiao’s housing compounds. After a year he quit to start an electric repair shop in a shopping centre in the development zone, as his job in the housing compound had exposed him to a high level of demand for repairing TVs and other appliances. The family lives in one room in the back of the store without a proper kitchen or toilet. They use the public toilets in the shopping centre. They are saving all of their profits from the shop in the hope of one day buying a private apartment (in 2010, private apartments in the development zone started at about 200,000 yuan for 80 square metres; a subsidised Weiqiao apartment of the same size was about 80,000 yuan). The younger brother has gone back to Gansu to visit his parents, but neither husband nor wife has been able to afford the trip back since first coming in 2008. Though quite divorced from their rural roots, this couple relied on familial connections to come to Zouping.

**Migrant worker family B:** This family of three (husband, wife, 11-year-old daughter) are from a village in Zaozhuang Prefecture (south central Shandong near the Jiangsu border). Since 2003, they have rented a room in an adobe village house near the development zone for 120 yuan a month. When they first came to Zouping they worked for Weiqiao in cotton spinning, but couldn’t stand the heat (in cotton spinning the temperature is maintained at 40 degrees centigrade year round) and found work in a smaller factory group at slightly less pay. They both work rotating shifts for seven 8-hour shifts a week; the husband earns 3,000 yuan a month and the
wife, 2,000. They are saving all their money to buy an apartment. They think they will have enough for a 50% down payment and a 50% mortgage in a couple more years. The wife hopes to have a second child in the next year or so. "When our younger daughter is one year old and our older daughter starts junior high school will be the perfect time to buy an apartment."

They return home twice a year (a ten-hour bus trip). Their home district is much poorer than Zouping. The paternal grandparents have only 2 mu of land to farm (a third of an acre), as the population-to-farmland ratio is much denser there. The younger couple say that they have a nice house back home, where it is less polluted, but Zouping offers better employment opportunities and better schools. Although the current high savings of this family’s members keeps them from participating in most of the consumer society that Zouping offers, they will have opportunities for more consumption once they manage to buy their own home. This couple is quite nucleated. Other than occasional visits to the husband’s parents, they have dis-embedded from their home community and focus all of their efforts on their own social advancement.

**Migrant worker family C:** This family of four (husband, wife, 11-year-old daughter, 4-year-old son) comes from Heze, the poorest prefecture in Shandong in the southwestern corner of the province. The couple both work at Weiqiao. The husband is a contract employee in cotton spinning making 2,600 yuan a month doing rotating shifts, while the wife just started at day shifts as a temporary employee earning 2,000 per month. She didn’t work from the birth of their son until he was old enough to go to kindergarten. When the wife gets too busy with her work and shopping, the elder daughter has to take care of her younger brother and walk him home from kindergarten. Although the husband is eligible to buy Weiqiao housing, he does not want to. The company housing can’t be resold on the open market and the “owners” don’t even get an owner’s certificate (fangchan zheng), he said. “Who could trust Weiqiao? They say you can get your money back if you move out, but we don’t feel comfortable with that.” For 200 yuan a month, the family rents two shabby rooms in an overcrowded village on the outskirts of the development zone. The husband said that he didn’t really like it in Zouping and that similar employment opportunities were available in many mid-sized Shandong cities, but that Zouping had the best schools of the places he had heard about. He added that in future, when his son is in junior middle school (and daughter in university), he would put his son in one of the school’s dormitories and move back to Heze with his wife. “We have a nice house there and it is more comfortable to live near friends and family.” This family endures alienation in Zouping in the hope that their children will one day attend university. Future plans involve re-embedding in the home community.

**Single migrant worker (female):** This woman was 23 and came from Dezhou, a poorer prefecture in northwestern Shandong. She has an older brother and younger sister, but their father left them when they were young and she was raised by her mother alone. “Do you know what it means to be a ‘single parent’ (danqin jiating) in the countryside?” she asked rhetorically. She came to Zouping eight years ago when she was 15 and managed to get a job spinning cotton, despite not having finished junior middle school (management told me they only hire junior middle school graduates). She has always been a “temporary worker,” and she always dreams of leaving. She said she dislikes working at Weiqiao – it is too hot and noisy and tiring – but that she is desperate because of the poverty of her family. She lives in a dorm room and said that it took a long time to make any friends. She hopes one day to move back to Dezhou and marry someone in her hometown.

**Single migrant worker (male):** He came from the neighbouring city of Zibo four years earlier when he was 19. In 2010, he made 2,000 a month working seven days a week in one of the smaller textile companies. He said that the money was alright, but that he was always tired and that he had to work seven shifts whenever management required if he wanted to keep his job. He lives in a dorm and hasn’t thought much about marriage yet and doesn’t know whether he would rather settle in Zouping or move back to Zibo. He said, “Overall, my situation isn’t good. To make money I have to take a job I hate. If I move back home, I won’t make money and I’d never have a family (chengbuliao jia).” For both of these workers, hopes of forming a family cause them to endure considerable alienation and loneliness. How much community embeddedness the future will bring is an open question.

**Villagers in the city**

As Zouping has expanded over the years, there has been a wide variety of conditions under which villagers have had their land requisitioned, but almost all have ended up better off than villagers who did not. Although the process has become more regulated over the past decade, even many of the villagers who had their land requisitioned during the 1990s are doing well. Here I focus on people from villages that had their land requisitioned since 2001, and those who live in the development zone rather than the new city district. Some villagers have had both their farmland and original houses requisitioned and have been moved into new apartment complexes. Other villagers have only lost their farmland, but continue to live in their original houses. The most fortunate live close enough to the factories and schools that they can earn significant money renting rooms to migrant workers, and some of these villagers have seen a quasi-illegal private construction boom of rental housing even though their villages are slated for eventual destruction (chaqian). Some villages have seen their population grow from less than 1,000 to more than 10,000 and are filthy, with sewage running out from overflowing public toilets and showers and garbage piles strewn around empty lots.

**Villager-in-the-city household A:** This family lives in the dirtiest and most populated rental village – but they have had considerable luck. There are seven people in this family: two paternal grandparents, husband, wife, an elder daughter who was 11 in 2011, and a twin pair of one-year-olds. They are the first Zouping couple I have met who legally have given birth to three children. For the first 30 years after their land was requisitioned in 2007, they will receive roughly 2,800 yuan per household member per year as “dunliang qian” (money for their loss of agricultural income, the total coming to about 20,000 yuan in 2010 for their household). They have built 18 cheap and shabby rental rooms on top of and around the seven very well-built and outfitted rooms they reserve for themselves in their courtyard house. The rental rooms were full and rented for 100 yuan a month each in 2010, so the family had a second source of approximately 20,000/year in income without working. The husband and wife also ran a clothing business selling mostly to migrant workers. They started off with a small earnings 2-3,000 yuan a month, but now have rented a shop and earn between 5,000 and 10,000 a month. The grandparents look after the children and cook. They own two cars. The parents only graduated from junior middle school, but this family now has a total income of considerably over 100,000 yuan.

12. The exact amount depends upon the market value of grain (wheat) on 31 July of each year and the total number of eligible recipients in the household and village as a whole.
a year. As an extended family, they remain in the community where the grandparents, parents, and children were born. As with most villager-in-the-city households, their community embeddedness is high.

**Villager-in-the-city household B:** This family of six lives in Beifan, a village that had its agricultural land requisitioned but which, as of 2011, was too far from the schools and factories to attract a significant room-rental business. The six family members include the paternal grandparents, husband, wife, an elder daughter in senior middle school, and an 11-year-old in year five in 2011. In 2010 they received 17,000 yuan in dunliang qian. The couple both stopped school after junior middle school. The husband makes 3,000 yuan a month working for a construction sub-contracting team organised by a village leader, while the wife makes 2,000 yuan a month working rotating shifts at Weiqiao. The grandparents retired after the family lost its farmland. As in many such cases, the grandparents use their newfound leisure time to help with the children and maintain ties to other households in the community.

**Villager-in-the-city household C:** This household comes from a village that has lost both its land and housing, though the village has a collective income stream from the former collectively-owned land. They live in a beautiful 150-metre square apartment in a compound that combines residents from their former village with those of two others. They bought the apartment in 2010 at the subsidised price of about 150,000 yuan. They estimate that it was worth about 350,000 yuan at 2011 market prices. They also receive free electricity and water as a result of the income their village receives from its collective real-estate holdings. With three household members, they received 10,000 yuan in 2010 in dunliang qian. The wife has taken a job as a saleswoman in the ritziest department store in the old city. She makes 800 yuan a month plus commissions, which vary between 500 and 1,000 a month. Her husband drives an unregistered taxi (heiche) and can make about 2,000 a month. He said that they were too comfortable to put up with factory work, and had selected occupations that give them relatively relaxed lifestyles. Though living as a nuclear family, the participation in village income streams and residence in a village apartment building suggest ongoing community ties.

**Factory work and Zouping’s future**

Zouping’s fate as a future community rests upon people committing to factory work. Here I briefly explore attitudes towards factory work among young people.

**Youths who dislike Weiqiao**

I have spoken with many single young people who have made a conscious choice to work as service personnel in Zouping’s hotels, restaurants, and shops. They know they could earn more money working at Weiqiao or one of the other factories, but they see such work, particularly at Weiqiao, as undesirable.

**22-year-old single man from Zouping:** He has a chemical engineering degree from a short course university. He works as an art teacher for children at a local art studio and makes about 1,600 yuan a month. He said that chemical engineering jobs in the local factories are dangerous. One of his classmates had already died in an explosion and another had suffered second-degree chemical burns on his face in a separate incident. He said the most profit-making industries were the most dangerous, as money was made by cutting corners on safety regulations and then compensating workers after accidents. In an infamous accident at Weiqiao’s aluminium refinery in 2008, about a hundred workers died when one of the boilers exploded. He said he would never work for Weiqiao, no matter how good the pay, as it was too dangerous.

**20-year-old single man from Hebei:** He arrived in 2009 to work in Weiqiao, but quit after two months. He couldn’t stand the heat and noise in the cotton spinning plant and in 2010 earned 1,100 yuan a month working as a doorman in a hotel. He said, “Earning money isn’t everything, I have to live my life. If work is torture then how can you continue? Now I feel free. I think I will go to Shanghai soon and try my luck there.”

**Youths looking for factory work**

Despite the negative opinions of some, there are still youths interested in working at Weiqiao and other nearby factories. The Zouping government has been helping the factories to recruit employees through its own technical school (zhiye xueyuan), which runs courses in whatever majors the local business groups demand. If the groups sign contracts agreeing to recruit a certain number of graduates, the technical school will recruit students from outside of the county. It has regular recruiting relationships with other prefectures in Shandong as well as Gansu, Hebei, Henan, and Hunan provinces. I joined a machine electronics class for a week and briefly interviewed all 34 members of that class, of whom 29 were male and 5 were female. 16 were from Zouping, 11 from other Shandong counties, and 7 from other provinces. While some of the non-locals hoped to find factory work in their hometowns, most of the Zouping students were aiming to get work in Zouping factories. They almost all grew up in villages and disliked academic schooling.

**17-year-old boy from a Zouping village:** He hates regular school, but likes fiddling with electric machines, so this major is good for him. His father works at Xiwang while his mother farms. He hopes to get a job at one of the factories in the development zone. He said the pay is good there – over 2,000 yuan a month.

**17-year-old girl from a Zouping village:** Her father is a temporary worker in Weiqiao and her mother farms the land. Her ideal is to become a doctor. She said she had already found work as temporary employees at Weiqiao. He lives with his parents in a rented room in Zouping, but considers home to be the village in northern Shandong, where his paternal grandparents still have farmland. He said he picked his major because his parents told him that it was easy to find work. He would like to be a contract worker in a factory in Zouping, doing electrical repairs.

**Urbanisation and people in transition**

The co-presence of the disparate groups that have been depicted here illuminates much about the patterns of urbanisation in the county. Many
conclusions may be drawn. In situ urbanisation certainly makes a difference. When a significant portion of the rural population does not have to travel far from home to secure industrial employment or to live in a place large enough to be called a city, forms of living that blur the divide between rural and urban, agricultural and industrial become possible. Regardless of the extent to which they live together or share a common budget, extended families can work together to raise children, pursue diverse economic opportunities, and care for sick members. Social networks flourish, and information about job opportunities and about the various advantages and disadvantages of town and village living can travel quickly. Agriculture can be undertaken as a part-time activity rather than fully abandoned. Finally, local governments and employers treat workers better, as a type of recognised constituent, if they see them as locals.

Yet there are limits to the difference in situ urbanisation can make, at least within a marketised economy. The companies that form the backbone of the Zouping economy cannot offer employment conditions that price their products out of the marketplace. A certain percentage of temporary workers must be used so the company can easily shed salary burdens during periods of economic recession. The harshness of factory discipline cannot be relaxed, and measures to improve work comfort or safety outstripping those of competing companies cannot be implemented.

To the extent that places such as Zouping are economically successful, they attract increasing numbers of outside migrants. If large companies can offer employment that is better than in other cities, or the schools are better and real estate prices are lower, they will attract migrants. If living standards progress to the point that locals will not put up with the bitterness of factory work, then companies take measures to recruit migrants. Both of these factors are apparent in Zouping. While Zouping has not exhausted the supply of local villagers willing to work at factory jobs, migrant workers are taking an increasing percentage of them. Migrant workers are more likely to be single or to live in nuclear families, become dis-embedded from their home communities, and are more likely to experience anomie and alienation.

I can imagine many possible futures for Zouping, but continuing economic prosperity seems to require continuing supplies of factory workers. As shown above, perceptions of the desirability of factory work tend to vary with age. But is this difference best understood as generational or as a life-stage difference? That is to say, are the youths who dislike factory work likely to change their minds once they marry and have children, or is their distaste for factory life a matter of being brought up in a different era and thus a relatively permanent aspect of their outlook? On the one hand, it is clear that, overall, Zouping’s youths are becoming better educated. Will university graduates be willing to work in factories alongside technical school graduates? On the other hand, it is quite clear that working in factories near to home has advantages over becoming a migrant worker, especially when one has children to raise. Will the lure of finding employment close to home outweigh aversion to factory work?

The more competitive the education system becomes, the more it guarantees a steady stream of students who hate academic life and either drop out of school or daydream their school time away. In addition, Weiqiao attempts to overcome aversion to difficult work with its wage structure. It purposefully pays higher wages to employees who undertake difficult jobs rather than automatically giving white-collar or pink-collar workers higher wages than blue-collar workers. I have no way of answering questions about the future desirability to local people of blue-collar work, but if in the future most new urban migrants and industrial workers come from outside the county, then Zouping may lose its distinctiveness as a site of in situ industrialisation.

Earlier in this article, it was observed that among the more affluent strata of households of Zouping City, urbane lifestyles have emerged both because of the intersection of relative wealth and consumption opportunity and because of the types of competitive consumption that develop within embedded social relations where many families are becoming more wealthy. This urbane consumerism is quite alien to the cramped lifestyles of some of the people whose profiles I have just presented. The co-presence of multiple forms of urban experience is a common circumstance. In part it is the multiplicity of the present that makes for the possibility of multiple futures. One way of thinking of urban transformations is not to portray it as the obliteration of old forms of life but as the simultaneous creation of new spaces and possibilities alongside the continual reinvention of the old. Cosmopolitan consumption, alienated youth, and shanty-towns on the urban fringe seem relatively new, at least in their extent. Yet, old lifeways, family forms, economic and political relationships, and patterns of thought (though transformed), somehow remain recognisable. In Zouping, we still see extended families, consumer tastes related to a rural habitus, small-scale farming, and the dynamics of finding meaning through familial sacrifice long after Zouping has been transformed from a town into a city.
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Peripheral Urbanism: Making history on China’s northwest frontier

ABSTRACT: This paper analyses the motives, processes, and effects of urbanisation in Korla, a small but rapidly expanding city in northwest China, where the author conducted over two years of fieldwork. The paper aims to show that the historical monuments of the urban environment are physical manifestations of a stirring, and often violent, program of ideational and socio-economic change that is directed at the periphery and all of its residents – even as some of those residents are also posed as agents of the ongoing transformation.

KEYWORDS: Chinese modernity, historiography, wenming, political aesthetics, habit, Xinjiang, inter-ethnic relations.

The argument of this article is that the urbanisation of rural, regional, and peripheral China has aims that include the modification of discourse and the retelling of history, as well as the modification of space and the remaking of everyday habits. The Chinese narrative of urbanisation is intimately connected with the broader narratives of modernisation, development, and “civilisation.” On the periphery of the Chinese state, this narrative of urbanisation concurrently seeks to maintain stability and to advance cultural and economic integration with the core regions of China. In other words, urbanisation has both tangible and intangible objectives, which are interwoven, interdependent, and inherently political.

I present my case by outlining some of the social and spatial transformations of Korla, a small but relatively well-off city located on the northern edge of the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang, western China. Korla is the administrative centre for oil and gas exploitation in the Tarim Basin (South Xinjiang), has a 70% Han population, and is the fastest-developing urban region in Xinjiang.

Two large state institutions have been most influential in shaping the city of Korla, both socially and spatially – the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, called bingtuan for short in Chinese, and China National Petroleum Corporation’s (CNPC) Tarim oil company (known as Tazhi).

The bingtuan is associated with agriculture, low-paid, work and “behindness.” Viewed from the metropole in eastern China, the bingtuan epitomises Xinjiang’s image as a “behind” (luohou 落後) and empty region. In direct contrast, the oil company is associated with China’s political and economic elite, with the country’s modernisation and with modernity per se.

Although Korla attained the bureaucratic status of a city in 1979, urban development really began to take off only with the expansion of oil and gas production in the Tarim Basin in the mid-1990s. The presence of the oil company means that the educational and consumption levels of the upper socio-economic class in Korla are high by national standards. Similarly, Korla’s urban space exhibits politico-aesthetic sensibilities that can be found in aspirational cities across China – broad and long boulevards, tall signature buildings, artificial watercourses, and government headquarters as a spatial focus. As such, Korla presents itself as “ahead” in a place that is “behind” – an outpost of metropolitan civility.

Demographics is a key element of this story. The Han in Korla today have come to the region in a series of waves since 1949, two main ones being the state-sponsored migration to work on the bingtuan through the 1950s, and the economically-motivated self-sponsored migration that began in the early 1990s, concurrent with the rapid growth of the Tarim oil company. South Xinjiang is otherwise populated predominantly by Turkic Uyghurs, and there is an underlying tension between Uyghur and Han in Xinjiang that occasionally flares up into violence.

In the ethnically-infused battle for hearts and minds that plays out constantly in Xinjiang, history and urban development are front-line weapons. The citizens of Korla are expected to “know their place” in official history and in the hierarchy of modernity. The local official history is particularly concerned with Han Chinese settlement in Korla and with Xinjiang’s relationship to the core regions of China. This history, as will be seen, is presented not just verbally but also in institutional, spatial, and monumental forms in Korla. It will also be seen how, in the process of urbanisation, the perspectives and the daily lived habits of the population get shaped and remade. It is through the remaking of habits that an empty “wasteland” becomes civilised, and a place with “neither culture nor history” gets shaped into one with both.

I thank Ben Hillman and Jonathan Unger for helping to shape this article, and two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments and suggestions for taking it further.

1. Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan (新疆生产建设兵团).
2. “Tazhi” is an abbreviation of Tali muyoutian gongsi zhihuibu (塔里木油田公司指挥部). Both the bingtuan and the oil company report directly to Beijing, rather than via the provincial-level Xinjiang government.
History and its making

Early urbanisation in Korla

Korla’s initial urbanisation derived from the bingtuan. The bingtuan was founded after 1949 as a system of military-agricultural colonies, and was the main force behind Han in-migration and cultural transformation in Xinjiang until the late 1970s. Bingtuan pioneers and their offspring make up a large proportion of the Han population of Korla, including the majority of those who were born in Xinjiang or settled in the region before 1980. Across Xinjiang, both the pioneers and their offspring strove to settle in urban areas, in order to escape the harsh conditions on bingtuan farms.

The bingtuan today is almost entirely civilian, and is a weaker social, economic, and political force than in the past, but it nevertheless remains important. The bingtuan is both a state-owned enterprise group and a parallel “quasi-government” in Xinjiang. It has a population of 2.5 million, 12% of Xinjiang’s population, but occupies 30% of the arable land. Although the bingtuan is located within Xinjiang’s administrative jurisdiction, it has its own budget, its own police force, and its own court system – a sort of bounded sovereignty.

Internally, the bingtuan is arguably the least reformed bureaucratic entity of

5. There are parallels here between the contemporary bingtuan and the inter-war South Manchurian Railway Company. Prasenjit Duara’s concept of the “new imperialism” – the coexistence of domination and exploitation with development and modernisation that was pioneered in Manchukuo – resonates in Xinjiang’s relationship with the Chinese metropole, especially considering the massive increase in state-directed investment in Xinjiang following the riots of July 2009. Prasenjit Duara, The New Imperialism and the Post-Colonial Developmental State: Manchukuo in comparative perspective, 1715, 30 January 2006, www.japanfocus.org/-Prasenjit-Duara/1715 (accessed on 22 August 2012).
comparable scope in China today. The resilience of the organisation is related to the fact that it is still seen by the central government as playing an important role in maintaining social and political stability in Xinjiang. In part, this is because the bingtuan’s 94% Han population occupies key peri-urban, rural, and border regions.

The soldier-farmers of the bingtuan were directed in the early 1950s to “defend the border and open the wasteland” by establishing agricultural colonies in strategic locations in Xinjiang. Xinjiang was seen by the victorious Communists as a tabula rasa, just as the Qing dynasty emperors of China did before them. The fact that at the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Xinjiang was already a diverse and dusty palimpsest of cultures, conflicts, and polities – both imagined and extant – presented no obstacle to this time-honoured conceit. It was, after all, the conqueror’s prerogative.

In the decades since the bingtuan was established, its evolution has framed the social, political, and economic milieu of Xinjiang. Any understanding of contemporary Xinjiang must take the bingtuan into account.

Korla has been shaped by Han in-migration since 1949. At the inception of “New China,” Han people amounted to only 1.4% of the population of Korla, and it was a county town of fewer than 30,000 people. A few small Uyghur villages spread out to the south of the township, and were enclosed and somewhat protected by a large bend in the Peacock River before the river enters the hard stony desert en route to extinction in the wastelands to the east. After 1955, the in-migration of more than 55,000 Han tripled the total population, and by 1965 Han people were in a 56.4% majority. An administrative reshuffle partly explains this rapid growth: Korla took over in 1960 from the nearby county of Yanyi as the capital of Bayinggualeng Mongol Autonomous Prefecture, and the bingtuan’s


Map 2 – Korla City administrative region map. The irrigation channels of the bingtuan 29th and 30th Regiments can be seen in the top left quadrant of the map. The Uyghur-populated rural areas are south and west of Korla City, around Awati Village. Korla City itself is in the top right quadrant.
Second Agricultural Division shifted its headquarters to Korla at the same time. (11)

The bingtuan’s unequalled transformative influence on the social space and economy of the Korla region began in 1950 with the construction of a large irrigation canal. The 18th Regiment Grand Irrigation Canal took 7,000 people nine months to build and enabled an irrigated area of 3,335 hectares. (12) Map 2 shows the geometric organisation of space in the newly-opened areas associated with the bingtuan – compare the straight outlines of the bingtuan irrigation channels and fields to the scribbly lines of natural seasonal watercourses and irrigation deltas of the villages (many populated largely by Uyghurs) to the south of Korla. Although this is a recent map, the organisation of rural space – land and water resources – shown in it dates from no later than the 1960s. The flat land presented no physical obstacle largely by Uyghurs) to the south of Korla. Although this is a recent map, the organisaton of rural space – land and water resources – shown in it dates from no later than the 1960s. The flat land presented no physical obstacle to large-scale state-organised agriculture, and allowed the ordered geometric arrangement seen in these images.

Maoist ideology had labelled the land as wasteland and positioned nature as what Mette Hansen calls “subaltern colonisers.” (13) For the demobilised soldiers-turned-bingtuan pioneers, the new “war” was posed as equivalent to the arduousness and valour of the civil war that many of them had fought for most of their adult lives. Subsequent waves of bingtuan settlers, most of them civilian, came to Xinjiang in the 1950s and the 1960s as what Mette Hansen calls “subaltern colonisers.” (14) They established their sites of settlement “at the margins of civility.” (15) In Korla, this meant attempting to farm the salty and inhospitable desert-fringe to the west of what was then an agricultural market town.

Bingtuan settlers, and the organisation itself, have long sought to leverage the discourse of their collective contribution to the type of developmentfavoured in Xinjiang by the central state. (16) In May 1966, the leader of a group of “sent down educated youth” who had come from Shanghai to labour on a bingtuan farm in Xinjiang declared: “The ever-changing picture of construction in [Xinjiang] is marked with our writing. This is our greatest happiness.” (17) She adopted the same narrative of selfless sacrifice and history-making transformation of a “behind” region that the state used to justify its actions, and claimed primary agency in that narrative for herself and her peers. (18)

Consistent with the discourse of historical frontier emptiness, an oft-stated claim among Han residents of Korla today is that “before Liberation [1949], there was nothing much in Korla, just a dirty little river and a few Uyghur farmers; even the Uyghurs came after the Han started to build the city.” These Han people directly equate development with the physical attributes of urbanisation and the height of the tallest buildings in town. On more than one occasion, the availability and quality of restaurants in Korla – public places of (literal) consumption – was also presented to me as a barometer of modernity and development:

One Sunday, just after we got to Korla [in 1991] and had been working [for the oil company] for a few weeks, I and a few classmates from university decided to get together to eat a meal. At that time, transportation was pretty undeveloped in Korla: we rode on mule carts – you know, like only the Uyghurs use today. The roads were dusty. There were only two places to go shopping, and pretty much everything was single-storey. We spent more than an hour riding around town on a mule cart before we found a place. That is to say, restaurants and eating-places were very scarce (…) At that time, [Korla] was really very behind.

12. Xianghong Jin, Bayingouleng Menggou zuzhishou zhi (The annals of Bayingouleng Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture), Beijing, Dongfang Zhongguo chuban she, 1994, p. 497.
16. An estimated 50,000 “sent down youth” from Shanghai were in Xinjiang by 1965, and the number reached 450,000 by 1972, of which at least 160,000 served on “army farms” – almost exclusively belonging to the bingtuan. See Thomas P. Bernstein, Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977, pp. 69-71; Lynn T. White, “The Road to Urumchi: Approved Institutions in Search of Attainable Goals during Pre-1968 Rustication from Shanghai,” China Quarterly, No. 79, 1979, pp. 505-06.
17. Survey of People’s Republic of China press, Hong Kong, American Consulate General, 9 May 1966, p. 27.
Korla was transfigured with increasing speed over the next two decades, due to the development of oil production in the Tarim Basin and the growing urban presence of the oil company. Among other things, the company constructed high-rise buildings in its compound that claimed and reclaimed the increasingly-vertical skyline of Korla, and impressed the status of the company on the city.

The Tarim oil company – Tazhi – is the aesthetic, aspirational, and spatial core of urbanisation in Korla. The oil company compound showcases modern-ness and a lifestyle that is associated with elite gated residential communities in eastern metropolitan China, and is something to aspire to for those outside the oil company. Life in the Tarim compound is quiet, regimented, physically and economically very secure, and above all exclusive.

A Tazhi division head noted that “once you get into this state-owned enterprise, you are set for life.” According to a vice-director of the Urban Landscaping Department, “Tazhi is the only successful residential district in Korla” because the watercourses and gardens of the commercially-built residential districts are unmaintained, and are now dried-out and decrepit. Tazhi is widely recognised as “the best work unit in Korla,” yet the oil company almost never takes on locals as permanent employees. New permanent employees are sourced from among the best and brightest young graduates from universities across China, causing locals (both Han and non-Han) to feel “left out” of the wealth and privilege associated with the oil company. A number of locals explained to me that “Tazhi is not really a part of Korla. It belongs to the centre” – meaning the central government.

Both energy production and commodity consumption by the highly-paid oil company employees help to raise Korla’s political-economic status. The city of Korla links its identity to oil and gas production, and thus portrays itself as playing an instrumental role in China’s economic development. Most sites of production, however, are far outside the city, and only half of the city government’s annual taxation revenue in 2009 derived from primary and secondary industries combined – including agriculture, mining, and oil and gas extraction. The other half was tax on tertiary industries – notably real estate, retail spending, and services. A local government cadre referred to Korla as “a consumption city” (xiaofei chengshi) due largely to oil company salaries. In the national and international economic picture, a high level of household consumption is a sign of advancement and modernity. In other words, today, the most exalted “constructors” (jianshezhe 建設者) and the most dedicated consumers are one and the same.

One way that this particular historical narrative – of the development with being instrumental in the successful development of the oil industry in the Tarim Basin. The Olympic torch brings the global glory of the Han civilisation, and the grand declaration of Chinese ascendance that was the Beijing Olympics, to the ethnic periphery. It is also a statement of allegiance by Korla to the core of the nation and an assertion of Korla’s pride in being part of this ascendance. The heightened nationalism of the torch relay, and the demonstrations by separatists and human rights advocates, lend the Korla Olympic torch monument an added emotive power in the context of Xinjiang. Through this and other monumental declarations that dominate the creation and consumption of historical monuments.

Reimagining history through monuments

Korla’s public monuments explicitly represent the key junctures of the meta-narrative that situates Korla historically – in particular, in relation to the Chinese core region and Han endeavours in Xinjiang. Seven kilometres to the north of Korla, for instance, is a monument, the Iron Gate Pass, which represents the presence of Chinese officialdom from the Chinese core region as early as the Han Dynasty – a primary basis of the contemporary Chinese claim to Xinjiang. Within the city, three other grandiose monuments mark key transition points of the official narrative history of Korla. These monuments are representations of 1950s bingtuan commander Wang Zhen (Photo 2), explorer/geologist Peng Jiamu (background, Photo 3), and the Beijing 2008 Olympic torch (Photo 3). Wang Zhen’s contribution was to build the large irrigation canal that gave life to the surrounding bingtuan farms and gave regional political importance to Korla. Peng Jiamu perished in the desert east of Korla while on an expedition to the ancient and once “lost” city of Lop Nur in 1980. He is held up as a martyr, and is credited with being instrumental in the successful development of the oil industry in the Tarim Basin. The Olympic torch brings the global glory of the Han civilisation, and the grand declaration of Chinese ascendance that was the Beijing Olympics, to the ethnic periphery. It is also a statement of allegiance by Korla to the core of the nation and an assertion of Korla’s pride in being part of this ascendance. The heightened nationalism of the torch relay, and the demonstrations by separatists and human rights advocates, lend the Korla Olympic torch monument an added emotive power in the context of Xinjiang. Through this and other monumental declarations that dominate

19. The revised resources tax implemented in July 2010 increased the revenue from primary industry, but expenditure on infrastructure construction also increased massively over the period. Among the effects of this is a rise in commodity prices and thus tertiary industries’ contribution to tax-revenue. For more, see Thomas Cliff, “The Partnership of Stability in Xinjiang: State–Society Interactions Following the July 2009 Unrest,” The China Journal, Vol. 68, 2012.

20. Developed Western nations and international financial institutions, as well as economists in the Chinese central government, urge the growth of domestic consumption in China as the key to “balancing” the Chinese economy. For further references, see Rod Tyers, “Looking Inward for Growth,” in How McKay and Ligang Song (eds.), Rebalancing and Sustaining Growth in China, Canberra, ANU E-Press, 2012.
key urban vistas, Korla’s urban development seeks to shape (or reshape) the narratives of both the future and the past of Han Chinese settlement in Xinjiang.

A fifth monument makes the story of history in Korla explicit. The violence inherent in civilising projects, and in this civilising project in particular, is summed up in visual narrative form by a large relief panel that adorns one side of a newly-built museum (see Photo 4). This political art is a celebration of violence and its central role in the history of the Korla region, and in the modern project more generally.

From the top, this panel commemorates Han Dynasty military victories, the bingtuan pioneers’ “war on the waste-land,” China’s development of atomic bomb technology at a no-longer-secret location in the mountains to the north of Korla (recently opened as a site of “Red Tourism”), and the oil company pioneers’ “campaign” to extract oil from the Tarim Basin, with a jackhammer wielded like a machine gun.

The second important point to take from this mural and from the other four monuments is the elision of non-Han agency, and even presence. There is a 2,000-year gap between the Han dynasty expeditions and the arrival of the bingtuan pioneers in 1950. Uyghurs and representatives of Xinjiang’s other official ethnic minority groups are nowhere to be seen – they are invisible and unnoticeable objects, not agents, of transformation. The mural poses as significant only those events that fall easily into a direct line with today’s preferred history, in which all of the agents of historical change are Han. Even the Manchu-ruled Qing is omitted – despite, and no doubt also because of, the fact that the current territorial extent of the PRC owes its greatest debt to Qing expansionism. It is as if the Qing were merely a weak echo of Han dynasty greatness, and not comparable to the resurgence of the Han ethnicity in the mid-twentieth century. The meta-narrative proclaims and glorifies early conquest, modern hegemony and muscular legitimacy. This and the modernity on display in Korla’s development – the flashy buildings, wide roads, and artificial watercourses – are emphatically lauded by the Party-state, and attributed to its institutional agents in Xinjiang – the bingtuan, the army, and most prominently the oil company.

City planning and the modern ideal in Korla

Korla’s relatively high political and economic profile in Xinjiang, combined with the importance of Xinjiang to China’s economy and sense of domestic social stability, make it a political priority for the city to be seen as a model of urban development. As tools of governance, city-planning models are the physical manifestation of preconceived ideals, and need to be replicable. James Scott’s analysis in Seeing like a State is useful here:

“A far-flung, polyglot empire may find it symbolically useful to have its camps and towns laid out according to formula as the stamp of its order and authority. Other things being equal, the city laid out according to a simple, repetitive logic will be easiest to administer and to police.”

18


Scott considers this formula to be part of a “high-modernist ideology,” and he notes that the “carriers of high modernism tended to see rational order in remarkably visual aesthetic terms.” (24) It follows that we use visual and spatial analyses to recount the development of this model.

The photographs and maps in this article illustrate that the organisation of space and the built environment of urban Korla is increasingly in accordance with the “administrative ordering of nature and society” that Scott terms “legibility.” (21) Until the early 1990s, all but the bingtuan-dominated “old” city centre of Korla was effectively still rural land in terms of how it was organised and utilised (Photo 5). The fields, irregular boundaries, and homes of extended families shown in the bottom half of Photo 5 are typical of a rural organisation of space. In the past, the relative proportions and positions of agricultural land, courtyards, and low adobe-style dwellings depended on the economic and population growth of these individual (mostly Uyghur) family units. Photo 6 illustrates Korla’s transformation from a rural centre to an urban model. These two photographs, and others later in this article, show that in the twenty-first century, Korla increasingly conforms to a planned, geometrically-ordered layout imposed from above. Materials too have changed – from being predominantly brick, earth, and wood, to being predominantly steel, concrete, and bitumen. The acceleration towards a geometric organisation of space – both on the two-dimensional map and in the three-dimensional built environment – is also a transition towards legibility. Although it was the bingtuan, not the Tarim oil company, that initiated the project of legibility, Tazhi’s political and economic gravity has enabled and led an intensification of legibility and ideal modernity in urban Korla. Legibility and a modern façade are, in the context of contemporary China, conditions of being civilised. Thanks to the economic boom brought on by the oil and gas extraction that began in the late 1980s, Korla is now an “All China Civilised City.”

Civilisation: Remaking habits

Civilising the city is a teleological process, in that it has a series of stages that must be passed through to reach a final destination. The final destination is imagined to be known, is often idealised, and is assumed to be imminent – reflecting what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “the enormous subterranean strength of the faith in inevitable progress.” (24)

In contemporary PRC discourse, civilisation has both material aspects (wuzhi wenming 物質文明: e.g. urban space, the built environment, consumption, and standard of living) and spiritual aspects (jingshen wenming 精神文明). This latter aspect is what Chinese state discourse means by “civilized people”: civility in personal qualities and behaviour – the opposite of being uncouth – e.g., properly educated, with good manners, taste, language, and accent, and loyalty to the official concept of nation. Both Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias have argued that the civilising mission is about normalisation and standardisation. (27) As is implicit in this 2007 billboard in Korla, civilisation in these terms is measured by the habits, habitus of the population, and is the foundation of a “harmonious society.” In other words, only one type of civilisation, and therefore one route to modernity, is posed as worthwhile here – a Han Chinese one.

The Korla City government and Party committee began a push to claim the title of “Civilised City” in 1996, declaring April 2 “Founding spiritual civilisation mobilisation day.” In the following years, Korla was awarded a series of increasingly prestigious awards, including: 1997 “All-China shuangyong [army-people] model city”; (28) 1998 “China outstanding tourism city”; 1999 “National-level hygienic city”; 2004 “All-China technological progress model city” and “National environmental protection model city”; 2005 “All-China constructing civilisation advanced city” and “CCTV 2006 China top-10 charming city.” (29) However, in practice there is a sense among Korla officials...
and residents that the ideal is never reached – the objective is a moving target that is always “up ahead.” A still-higher award, which is yet to be attained, is “Ecological City” – described as an urban area in which humans live in harmony with nature.

Alongside this rhetorical focus on the style of development, the vice director of the Urban Landscaping Department was also notably concerned with crude growth when he outlined the city’s 2005 development plan to me in 2008. He stated categorically that “the population of a city must keep increasing” – from the 2010 figure of 550,000 to at least 800,000 by 2015. Although this sounds like a tall order, almost half of the difference could be made up by reclassifying the temporary migrants who do not currently hold household registration in Korla. Spatially, the plan for Korla designates specific areas as, for example, green space (minimum 40%), waterways, residential, or government institutions, and includes an expansion of the urban area from 38 km² to at least 60 km² over the 2010-2015 period.

Korla underwent a period of especially accelerated physical construction in 2007-2009. When I got there in July 2007, I was struck by the large number of advertisements for as-yet unbuilt residential estates. Their promotional strategies drew on a perceived desire for European, metropolitan, and colonial endeavours, and the frontier was also strongly present. A high-profile development named Future Zone is one example, but another (Photo 9) is both more subtle and more distinctly Chinese in meaning “to move/relocate” or “to change” – is a homonym of qiantu (迁徙), meaning “future” or “prospects.” The emphasis on this combination of concepts – relocation and future prospects – is quintessentially frontier. Migrants from the core region look forward to making their fortune on the frontier, spurred on by a long-running narrative that “Xinjiang is a place where constructors engaged in opening up can make the best of themselves.” Less universal, but no less striking, was the intimate connection made in these real estate advertisements between urban watercourses (existing or planned) in this desert region, centres of administrative power, and high-status residential areas. The brochures and billboards often situated the planned residential district in spatial relationship to the offices of the city or of the prefectural government as well as to at least one of the four main public bodies of water in the urban area. Residential districts often also advertised their own water feature within the compound. Such for-consumption water features have displaced an earlier network of irrigation canals that were used primarily for productive and practical purposes, and were associated with small-scale agriculturalists – most of whom were Uyghur.

**Urban transformation, Uyghur dislocation**

The rate and style of urban reconstruction – and social change – can be seen in the following six images. Photos 10 to 13 show the redevelopment of socially and spatially porous urban villages on the eastern side of Korla into gated residential compounds. Most of the landowners in the urban villages are Uyghurs who live in single-story adobe and brick dwellings that they have progressively added to as their family size and wealth grew. Their economy is semi-subsistence: most families grow vegetables for their own consumption, and may raise a few sheep or goats that they then consume or convert into cash; the landed families tend cash-crop orchards of the nationally-famous Korla fragrant pear. Compensation (calculated per square meter) for this agricultural land is less than one half of the compensation for residential land whose buildings are not declared “illegal.” This is a point of great tension and an opportunity for corrupt and coercive behaviour on the part of state actors. For their part, Uyghurs living in villages in line for demolition hastily extend the floor area of their dwellings. Although some profess to be quite happy with their compensation, most Uyghurs are extremely reluctant to leave their extended family compounds for the sterility and atomisation of a distant apartment complex. It is not just family life that is upset – many Uyghurs are self-employed and run businesses that rely on a base close to the city centre. For them, relocation means unemployment. On the whole, Korla’s current wave of urban reconstruction means a disruptive change in the practices of inner-city Uyghurs’ everyday life – including cooking, eating, cultural production, and social reproduction.

The Uyghur residential buildings that are being eradicated in Korla helped to sustain Uyghur community life, though it cannot be said that the buildings and layout of the villages represented some fundamental symbol of Uyghur-ness. These villages have not developed organically over hundreds of years – as in the case of Kashgar, for example. Instead, a regular diamond...
and other Uyghurs just arrived off the slow bus from Kashgar. Every urban resident is engaged in consuming and re-creating the narrative of urban China, habits are forced to change when villages are transformed into urban themselves. The stroller meets groups of disoriented migrant labourers from came from, why they came, what they do now, and how they identify culturalists and the mainly Han state.

tion – a diversity stemming from when they came to Korla, where they evidently finished buildings rise out of rubble, and artificial stream beds run throughfares. The old urban villages are walled in, out of sight, before being de-

The project to transform space and society is far from complete. Appar-
ently finished buildings rise out of rubble, and artificial stream beds run weakly – if at all. Korla’s “civilised” façade, impressive as it is, is in many places only skin deep: scratch the surface and you will find a provincial desert town. Urban planning policies require developers to construct tall signature buildings on highly visible street corners and along major thor-
oughfares. The old urban villages are walled in, out of sight, before being de-
molished altogether and their residents relocated.

A stroll through these back alleys reveals the diversity of the popula-
ration – a diversity stemming from when they came to Korla, where they came from, why they came, what they do now, and how they identify themselves. The stroller meets groups of disoriented migrant labourers from central and eastern China, old bingtuan people and their children, old Korla people who never quite recovered from the final collapse of state enterprises during the 1990s, well-off employees of state enterprises that are doing well, Uyghurs whose families have lived around Korla for generations, and other Uyghurs just arrived off the slow bus from Kashgar. Every urban resident is engaged in consuming and re-creating the narrative of urban development and transformation. Many take on the narrative – or want to – but even those who don’t eventually have little choice but to change their habits.

Urbanisation as habit

Urbanisation is a process of remaking habits. In Korla, as in cities across China, habits are forced to change when villages are transformed into urban residential communities, when spaces of production are transformed into spaces of consumption, and when an assumption of peripheral behindness becomes an expectation of metropolitan modernity. Old pathways disappear under high-volume road grids, forcing people to modify the way they move through the city and thus whom they encounter. Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” clearly sig-
alled how architecture and urban space has a corporeal impact on humans: “Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception...” He goes on to claim that “the tasks which face the human apparatus of per-
ception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit...” The very act of living in a constantly-changing city works to transform the residents’ habits of mind and body.

Han and Uyghur people respond to the disruption of habits in quite dif-
ferent ways. As shown above, it is usually Uyghur neighbourhoods, and the roads running to and through them, that are destroyed to make way for the new plan. Relocated Uyghurs experience massive social and economic changes to their lives. Many Uyghurs justifiably see the destruction of old roads and neighbourhoods as an imposition. Han, on the other hand, tend to see such destruction as a necessary condition of advancement, and an inevitable stage in the modernisation project. Many Han honestly fail to understand why Uyghurs would rather stay in unheated, earth-floored houses than in modern apartments. For Han migrants, change is not only an aspiration but also a way of life – beginning with their migration from the core area and continuing with their implicit or explicit role as agents of development and civilisation.

The aesthetics and objectives of peripheral urbanisation are, by definition, Han- and metropole-centric. The coercive force of urbanisation processes are being brought to bear on Uyghurs, but Uyghurs and other non-Han eth-
nicities are not the only objects of this element of the civilising project in Xinjiang. Han people – especially rural, regional, and peripheral (including

32. At the same time, it would be reasonable to suggest that an essential characteristic of Uyghur-


the lure of the city is taking over part of the role that formal state institutions performed in the past – in attracting, regulating, and transforming the (Han) in-migrants – as well as in regulating and transforming the lifestyles of the Han, Uyghurs, and others already in Xinjiang.

City building as frontier consolidation

The quintessentially rural and peripheral bingtuan has also recently taken on the ideology of urbanism. In direct response to the violent conflict and political upheaval that began with the ethnic riots of July 2009 in Xinjiang, the organisation’s founding mandate – “opening wasteland, garrisoning the frontier” – was officially, and at the highest level, modified to: “building cities, garrisoning the frontier.”[37] “Garrisoning the frontier” in this context is less a military exercise than a cultural, demographic, and politico-aesthetic project – modern urbanisation. The bingtuan needs an urban model to counteract its chronic problem of depopulation (especially among able-bodied, working- and reproductive-age men and women), and it is imperative that the first of the new urban models is seen to succeed if there is any hope of slowing this population flow and attracting new settlers.

City-building could signal a transformation in the political economy of Xinjiang. Academics from the influential Urban Planning and Design Institute at Shanghai Tongji University recently argued strongly for the administrative, as well as spatial and economic, merging of peri-urban bingtuan areas with the local urban centre.[38] There is some logic in this: an urban centre has social, political, economic, and cultural gravity that a market town does not, and this allows the urban centre to project its place-making over a broader geographical area. A few years earlier, planners argued for a “stratagem of comparative centralisation,” pointing out that aridity, large distances between oases, and the relatively small economic scale of urban areas in Xinjiang mitigate against the construction of an urban network with multiple centres.[39] Moreover, bingtuan cadres confirmed in early 2013 that formal ranking as a city in the non-bingtuan administrative system will allow thus-classified bingtuan areas to tax residents and economic activity within their jurisdiction. This is important, since it grants a previously-unavailable source of income and affirms the bingtuan’s nested autonomy while simultaneously blurring certain boundaries between it and the non-bingtuan system. Could this be the peripheral version of an urban agglomeration – the Greater Shanghai region writ super-small?

The first of the new peri-urban developments will be constructed on the site of the bingtuan’s 29th and 30th Regiments to the west of Korla (see Map 2). Bingtuan Regiments are functionally equivalent to market townships in the local government system. While the former bingtuan areas closest to Korla have already been incorporated into the urban area, these

Xinjiang) Han people – are also seen to have “nasty habits.”[36] Although the final objective – integration of the ethnic periphery created by the Qing dynasty and inherited from the Qing by the Republic and then the People’s Republic – has not changed markedly over the course of the past 60 years, the social and political context that this colonial endeavour is unfolding within, and creating, certainly has. Han migration to Xinjiang today is predominantly voluntary, rather than state-sponsored and coercive as in the past; many migrants are self-employed, or work in services or the construction industry in the urban centres; and these days, most migrants are not members of large formal state institutions like the bingtuan and the oil company. Furthermore, the Han population of Xinjiang is now within a few percentage points of the Uyghur population, even by official figures.[36] The changed, and changing, context has necessitated an adjustment of the methods and processes of peripheral integration. In particular this means an adjustment of the aesthetics, economics, and demographics of settlement, which in turn means accelerating a particular style of urban development in both the cities and the rural town centres of Xinjiang. In a sense,
model, they do not slavishly emulate the core. Rather, an aesthetic is emerging that is associated with the Han – and with the core that they implicitly represent, whether or not they have ever been there – but is peripheral. This aesthetic is framed by a different history and looks forward to a different future to that of the core aesthetic.

Urbanisation is often treated as a process of transforming space and social relations. Here I have expanded on this idea in two different ways. First, I have tried to show that urbanisation in a city like Korla on the Chinese frontier entails a particular process of remaking history and place. Second, I have suggested that how people experience urbanisation – how they remake their habits of mind and body – is itself a key objective of urban development in China. [49] This place-, history-, and subject-making is considered politically useful, even essential, to nation-building on the frontier.

Conclusion

My visual and spatial exploration of the urban morphology, architecture, and monuments of Korla shows a strong push towards the currently-dominant nationwide ideal of urban Chinese modernity. [41] In Xinjiang, these grand plans of engineering are far less constrained – by history, culture, or space – than in central and eastern China. The plans and their implementation are also inflected by the need to present a particular set of nested images – of Korla and its truncated history; of the centre and its power and benevolence; and of the nation and its unity. But unlike some other Chinese cities that lie “Beyond the Great Wall,” the urban morphology and architecture of Korla pay only the most superficial tribute to the history, culture, and aesthetics of the local non-Han. [42] And although cities on the Chinese frontier today take the aesthetics of the core regions of China as their

urbanised townships are to become a “satellite city” of Korla. They will supposedly benefit from proximity to Korla as the area’s logistics hub and as a centre of consumption. [40]

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ABSTRACT: In contrast with China’s coastal regions, where rural urbanisation has largely been a result of industrialisation, urbanisation in the once predominantly rural towns of the interior is sometimes driven by local government policies. This article focuses on a case study of Zhongdian (Shangri-la), where urbanisation has mainly been driven by tourism. It shows that while the problem of land seizures has been generally less violent in this sparsely populated area of the interior, the urbanisation of this ethnically diverse area of northern Yunnan has generated a distinct set of problems. While local officials have strong incentives to pursue policies that promote urbanisation, they have few incentives to pursue policies that promote equal access to the new economic opportunities that accompany urbanisation.

KEYWORDS: rural China, urbanisation, ethnic minorities, Tibet, employment, education, inequality.

In contrast with China’s coastal regions, where rural urbanisation has largely been a result of industrialisation, urbanisation in the once predominantly rural towns of the interior is sometimes driven by local government policies. This article examines the motivations behind these policies, and the consequences of rapid rural urbanisation for an ethnically complex part of China.

Zhongdian is the urban centre and seat of government of Shangri-la County, in northwest Yunnan Province. It is a largely rural county with a population of 176,000, of whom approximately 60,000 today live in Zhongdian. Its transformation from a rural town into a small city has occurred over the past two decades. Before the 1990s, Zhongdian was an economic backwater. The journey to the provincial capital – a distance of 750 kilometres – took more than two days, and the first day was spent on a single-lane dirt road. There was almost no industry or off-farm employment available to the local population. When I first visited the region in 1999, the dusty town consisted of one paved street, along which stood dilapidated buildings housing government offices, a state-owned bank, the post office, and the county and prefecture’s small official department stores. A handful of shops sold hardware, clothes, and domestic goods. There was no supermarket. Outside the post office was a rail for tying horses – the main means of transport for most locals.

Until the 1990s, agriculture, animal husbandry, and forestry were the mainstays of the local economy. The county government depended on state-controlled commercial forestry for most of its locally generated revenue. Stimulated by rising demand for raw materials in the booming eastern provinces, commercial forestry triggered the first stage of urbanisation in Zhongdian in the 1990s when a handful of urban services sprang up to support centrally located timber mills, but the logging operations were too widely dispersed for forestry to trigger urbanisation on a larger scale. In 1998, the central government suddenly banned logging, which had an immediate and deleterious impact on local government coffers. In response, a cabal of forward-thinking county leaders devised a new economic development strategy based on tourism. They were encouraged by the economic success of tourism in many other parts of the province and believed that they could attract large numbers of tourists due to the attractiveness of the nearby countryside and the allure of an area inhabited by Tibetans and other ethnic peoples. The key problem was the inadequacy of infra-

1. In 2002 Zhongdian County changed its name to “Shangri-la” County in an effort to promote tourism. Because locals continue to call the county town “Zhongdian,” I will do the same in this article to avoid confusion.
2. While accurate population statistics are unavailable, ethnic minorities are widely believed to account for more than two-thirds of the town’s population. Tibetans are the largest ethnic minority group in Zhongdian, followed by Naxi.
3. The ban was instituted after scientific assessments suggested that disastrous flooding of the Yangtze River and the prolonged flow stoppage of the Yellow River were caused by deforestation. The logging ban applied to 75 million acres of forest across 17 provinces. More than a million forestry workers lost their jobs as a result of the ban. See Yang Yuexian, “Impacts and effectiveness of logging bans in natural forests: People’s Republic of China,” in Patrick B. Durst, Thomas R. Waggener, Thomas Enters, and Tan Lay Cheng (eds.), Forests Out of Bounds: Impacts and Effectiveness of Logging Bans in Natural Forests in Asia-Pacific, Bangkok, Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2001, pp. 81-102.
4. The county head and one of the deputy county heads were at the heart of the pro-tourism cabal. They received strong support from the county Party secretary and the Governor of Diqing, who at the time was writing a Master’s thesis on economic development in China’s ethnic minority regions.
5. Zhongdian was home, for example, to one of the region’s most significant Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. On relations between local government and monastic leaders during a period of rapid economic development and urbanisation that engulfed the monastery, see Ben Hillman, “Monasticism and the Local State: Autonomy and Authority in a Tibetan Prefecture,” The China Journal, No. 54, 2006, pp. 22-52.
structure and services. The nearest airport was six hours away by car from Zhongdian, and the road network was rough and dangerous. Accommodation was basic and limited. Entrepreneurial county authorities responded to the challenge by securing special-purpose grants from the provincial government to improve roads. Construction began on a new airport, and resources were invested in expanding the urban centre. The timing of the county’s efforts was serendipitous. The central government had begun to dramatically increase investments in China’s underdeveloped and ethnically diverse western regions, and large fiscal transfers were available for such development projects.

At the same time, domestic tourism was starting to boom in China. Increasingly wealthy urbanites from the eastern seaboard were holidaying in ever greater numbers and travelling to ever more exotic locales. Tourism numbers received a major boost in 2000 when the central government increased the number of China’s public holidays in order to stimulate the leisure economy. A record number of 1.24 million people visited Zhongdian in 2001, up from 43,000 visits in 1995. While this figure included all arrivals, including business travel and locals returning home, the numbers still represented an enormous increase. The social and economic impact of tourism was profound and immediate. As new hotels, restaurants, and other facilities mushroomed, the surrounding rural population as well as economic migrants from other regions flocked to the county capital in search of employment and business opportunities. Zhongdian began to urbanise at breakneck speed.

From the end of the 1990s to the mid-2000s, more than 200 hotels and guesthouses sprang up in and around the town, accompanied by an explosion in the number of retail and food outlets and dozens of new residential housing projects. More than a hundred kilometres of paved town roads were constructed, including a new ring road. Thousands of new cars were registered within the space of a few years, leading to traffic chaos, since the locals were unaccustomed to urban traffic rules. Rural villages that were once peripheral to Zhongdian became swallowed up in the new urban sprawl. Cows and pigs began competing with cars for right of way on the streets. The county commissioned Shanghai-based architects, including one American, to develop a new plan for the town centre, completed in 2008, that included a large paved square reminiscent of China’s grand cities flanked by a new theatre and an upmarket shopping district (see photos 1 and 2).

A colourful example of Zhongdian’s transformation was the local government’s effort to breathe new life into the “Old Town,” known locally as Dukezong. In the pre-PRC era and during the early decades of the PRC, Dukezong was the centre of Zhongdian – a trading hub along the main trade route between Lhasa and lowland China. Dukezong was essentially a compact village of rammed-earth Tibetan houses surrounded by residents’ crops and grazing land. Even though many of Dukezong’s residents had worked as traders, each family had maintained its own fields. At the centre of Dukezong was an open ground that was used as a periodic market, to which farmers from surrounding districts would gratefully deliver their produce every ten days. Following the introduction of brick housing during the 1960s and 1970s, residents had gradually abandoned the old town. When I first visited Zhongdian in 1999, the old town was derelict. A few houses on the periphery were occupied by elderly farmers, but the young people had gone.

In the early 2000s, Dukezong was discovered by international backpackers seeking exotic destinations in Yunnan Province. In 2002, an Englishman rented an abandoned farmhouse in Dukezong and converted it into a bar. For the first two years of its existence the bar remained a lonely enterprise on a muddy street with no water, sewage, or electricity. But the bar and a couple of other similar enterprises run by foreigners caught the attention of local authorities, who began to see the tourism potential of Dukezong Old Town, similar to the renovated old towns of Dali and Lijiang, popular tourist spots at lower elevations on the same old China-Tibet caravan route as Zhongdian. Seeking investments from higher levels, county leaders took visiting officials from the provincial and central government, including one member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, to the bar as an example of what could be done with the old houses.


6. Rapid tourism-led growth has been a feature of development in many parts of China’s western provinces, particularly in Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan Provinces. For another case study of the effects of tourism on the pace of urbanisation in China’s ethnic minority regions see, Liu Xiaoying and Yang Jianhua, “Kubu minzu diqu nongcyang chengzhenhua fuzhan moshi yanjiu – yu yangzou diqu Juzaigouxian weile” (Development models of rural urbanisation in the western ethnic regions – the example of Juzaigou County), Heilongjiang Minzukan, No. 3, August 2007, pp. 1-10.

Within two years, Dukezong was transformed. The streets were paved with old-looking cobblestones, and old-fashioned street lamps were erected on street corners. Sewage pipes, running water, and electricity were installed. The owners of the abandoned houses began putting "for lease" signs in doorways. Before long, nearly every property in Dukezong had been rented by small businesspeople from other parts of China and overseas. In the early years, locals mostly sat by and watched, puzzled that outsiders were willing to pay money for houses that were falling apart, but they have now joined in the scramble to attract tourist money, opening their own businesses. They also flock there for their own recreational purposes. At the Old Town's refurbished market square, the neighbourhood committee organises community dances each evening. Locals also benefited from the influx of products and services as the town expanded. The new restaurants, bars, and supermarkets were especially popular.

In short, although rapid urbanisation has created problems such as pollution and unsightly construction, Zhongdian's transformation into a small city has been mostly a boon for the locals. Many of them have been able thus far to enjoy a lifestyle that is neither expressly rural nor expressly urban. Many families have continued to live in large Tibetan-style houses with courtyards, while benefitting from all the urban services that were newly available. Many families that owned property in or around the Old Town became rich. While their old houses were rented for only a small sum in the early years, by the time those leases expired, rents were worth many times more. By 2012, the annual rent for the original bar, leased for 2,000 yuan per year in 2002, was 40,000 yuan.

The local government's land-sales boom

As Zhongdian's land values skyrocketed between 2003 and 2013, the county government was a primary beneficiary. The county government possessed several centrally located tracts of land that it had acquired from farmers in the 1980s at very low prices for the future construction of administrative buildings, public facilities, and housing for government employees. Enormous revenues could be generated by making this land available for urban development, and the revenues from the sale of this land could be used at local government discretion.

The county government has generated a huge amount of land revenue in three main ways. First, officials could sell to private developers the use rights (shiyong quan) to tracts of land the county controlled. These land-use rights could be sold for several hundred times the price at which the county had originally acquired the land from local farmers. As an indication of the profits involved, in a 2004 auction in a new shopping precinct in Zhongdian, a piece of land less than half the size of a standard American suburban house lot sold for 480,000 yuan ($US$60,000). The county had acquired the land from a farmer many years earlier by providing only 200 yuan ($US$25) in compensation. A 2011 survey of similar land transactions across 17 counties showed that the average price per acre paid by local governments for farmland was $17,850 and that when local authorities resold the land to commercial property developers and other buyers the average sale price was $740,000 per acre.

The other means of generating revenue from land has been through fees charged for land title conversions. Rural land in China is generally classified as either (i) farmland, (ii) land for house construction/commercial development, or (iii) wasteland. As in other parts of the world, these zoning categories determine the legally permitted use of the land. Land classified as farmland, for example, may only be used for farming and not for residential, commercial, or industrial purposes. Before farmland can be used for these purposes, it must undergo a title conversion — a process administered by the county government's Land and Resources Bureau, which charges a handsome fee for this service, up to 80,000 yuan ($US$12,500) per mu (one sixth of an acre/one fifth of an hectare). While this type of fee has become a major source of local government revenue across China, in Zhongdian the importance of such revenues is magnified by the narrowness of the local tax base.

The conversion of farmland for urban residential and commercial use also presented local officials with unprecedented opportunities for self-enrichment. Local powerbrokers could use their influence to arrange the transfer of land to a private enterprise at much below the market value of the land in return for an informal fee. This was especially easy to arrange if the beneficiary was designated a "strategic" local enterprise, which entitled it to preferential treatment. Local officials could also make large profits by speculating on land. Officials with access to government urban development plans, especially the construction of new roads, could easily predict which tracts of land would likely increase in value in the future — a common feature of local political corruption in many parts of the world. Setting up front companies, often registered under the name of a relative, local officials first privately acquired the land and then sold it at a profit when the infrastructure was completed. In the early 2000s, Shangri-la County constructed two new wide avenues for government offices, residential complexes, and shopping malls. Between 2002 and 2005, the commercial lots along these avenues sold for previously unimaginable sums. Several officials who had possessed insider information about the city's construction plans became rich.

Indeed, during the 13 years that I have been visiting Zhongdian County it has been clear that many local officials have become rich despite receiving only modest official salaries. Their houses have grown larger — many officials now own several properties — and their consumption has grown increasingly conspicuous. Local officials are now accustomed to taking overseas holidays, sending their children to study abroad, buying expensive toys, and spending thousands of dollars on food and entertainment. The new wealth of local officials is frequently on display in local hotels and restaurants. According to local restaurateurs in Zhongdian, it has become common for local officials to spend 10,000 yuan (US$1,300) or more per table, which is more than double the total monthly take-home pay, including allowances, of a county bureau chief. Most enjoy lifestyles commensurate with their counterparts in the eastern provinces. Many officials enjoy lifestyles of great luxury in comparison with ordinary citizens.

The third way local officials could generate revenue from land development was through increased taxation. Under the current tax-sharing system, county governments are entitled to keep up to 95% of taxes on commerce, residential housing, and construction. Not surprisingly, the county government actively promoted development projects that featured retail and office space as well as residential housing. The increase in housing stock became especially important when Zhongdian officials decided, in the mid-
2000s, to seek the elevation of Zhongdian’s administrative status from rural county to county-level city (shi).\(^\text{10}\) To do this, county officials would need to increase the size of the town’s population.

The officials sought city status for their county for a number of reasons. Cities typically enjoy a higher administrative status than rural counties, and county-level city leaders enjoy greater access to higher political levels. The Party secretary of a county-level city, for example, will usually become a member of the prefecture Party Standing Committee, giving him or her influence over key decisions in the next-higher level of government. In some provinces, county-level cities report directly to the province, circumventing the intermediate level of administration. City governments also acquire greater control than their rural-county counterparts over foreign investment, trade, and foreign exchange. City officials also have greater control over the local police force, including over recruitment, than their rural county counterparts. City officials also have the authority to approve large investment projects without referring them to higher levels. City governments can also establish new departments for the purpose of urban administration and expand existing departments such as transport and urban construction. This enables county bosses to hire more officials, which is an important source of patronage in rural China.\(^\text{11}\) Cities also gain discretion over larger portfolios of loans from the largest state-owned banks, providing better access to cheap credit for local enterprises, many of which are controlled by local officials, and to local government financing vehicles (LGFVs), which can circumvent central government restrictions on direct borrowing by local governments. City governments can also administer new taxes and charge higher taxes on construction (7% instead of 5%) and on local businesses.

City-status would also allow Zhongdian officials to apply for additional fiscal transfers for urban infrastructure development. Infrastructure projects are attractive because many of the families of officials have stakes in local construction companies. Even when an official cannot secure a contract for a family company, he can enjoy the generous kickbacks that typically accompany public works projects.\(^\text{12}\) City-status also enables officials to increase the quotas of farmland to be converted to nonfarm use and enables Zhongdian officials to increase the fee for land title conversions, as different standards apply for cities.\(^\text{13}\)

Approximately 15% of China’s counties were upgraded to city status between 1983 and 1997. Since then, there have been fewer upgrades. The practice has been discouraged since 1997 following recognition that the criteria for upgrading had been too loosely applied, and the central government tightened and clarified the standards that needed to be met. The criteria now specify minimum levels of industrialisation, urbanisation, and county government revenue (see Table 1). However, the fact that the criteria vary according to population density suggests that conferment of city status has as much to do with dispensing political rewards as it does with recognising the urban transformation of rural areas.\(^\text{14}\)

In 2002, the non-farm population of Zhongdian town was approximately 24,000, and it would have been impossible to increase this number to 100,000 within a decade. However, according to county officials, the criteria referred not to the official urban population – i.e., the number of residents with urban household registration status (hukou) – but rather to the total number of residents engaged in non-farm labour. This meant that officials could include in their population statistics the thousands of migrant workers who had come to Zhongdian to work in tourism and related industries. Even though this would still not have lifted the total number of town residents to 100,000 (in 2012, officials privately guessed the town’s permanent population to be somewhere between 60,000 and 70,000), Zhongdian officials argued that on any given day there were thousands of tourists staying in Zhongdian for whom urban services had to be provided.

As outlined in Table 1, a second criterion that Shangri-la County needed to meet to be elevated to city status was that at least 20% of the official county population had to be registered as residents of Zhongdian Town. So to boost the registered urban population, the officials encouraged government employees from across the county and prefecture (Zhongdian also served as the prefecture’s seat of government) who were registered elsewhere to buy real estate in the county town, making them eligible to be registered there. The county government sponsored a number of housing development projects, and provided subsidised housing purchases to permanent staff of government departments.

### Table 1 – Minimum criteria for county-level cities in China (2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Industrialisation</th>
<th>Industrial output (billion yuan)</th>
<th>&gt;400</th>
<th>100-400</th>
<th>&lt;100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Industrial output as % of county GDP</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Urbanisation</td>
<td>Size of non-farm population (thousands)</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% urban population</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of fiscal revenue</td>
<td>Fiscal revenue (million yuan)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fiscal revenue per capita (yuan)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ?

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10. Cities in China are accorded different administrative status. Four cities – Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Tianjin – have provincial status, which essentially means that the mayors of these cities have the same rank as provincial governors. In China today there are 284 prefecture-level cities and 369 county-level cities. Many prefecture and county-level cities are not cities in the strict sense, but are large administrative zones built around an urban core that often includes rural villages and farmland.


13. Interview, former Zhongdian County official, 30 September 2012.

14. This is the conclusion of a study by a PRC researcher, who found that city status has generally been awarded to counties whose officials have achieved high levels of economic growth and successfully aligned county government priorities with the centre’s. See Li Ling, The Incentive Role of Creating ‘Cities’ in China, China Centre for Economic Research, Peking University, 2008.

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These and other housing projects that the government promoted increased the pace of rural land expropriation around the county town. The farmers whose land was expropriated in entirety also automatically became eligible for urban residency status (chengshi hukou). This was a win-win situation for the county government and the peri-urban farmers. It allowed county officials to quickly boost the number of urban residents while reducing the potential for the farmers’ resistance so long as the land-purchase price offered by the government seemed acceptable to them. Urban household registrations were very attractive because these provided access to urban services such as better healthcare and education, and to better welfare entitlements such as pensions.

Another policy that helped to increase the population of Zhongdian was the decision in 2007 to relocate all of the county’s secondary schools to the county seat. While the official explanation for doing so was to reduce costs and increase education quality by concentrating resources in a central location, officials privately acknowledged that a key motivation was the boost it would give to the urban population. The new schools brought in not only relocated staff and their families, but also communities of service providers.

Through these and other means, by 2011 the percentage of urban-registered residents in the county had increased to 25%, thereby meeting a key criterion for county-city status. Zhongdian duly presented a formal application to the Yunnan provincial government to be officially recognised as a city. (17) Satellite imagery in plates 3 and 4 below highlight the urban expansion of Zhongdian between 2003 and 2012.

**The consequences of rapid urbanisation**

The vast changes underway in Zhongdian have had two negative social consequences. The first has been an increase in conflicts over urban expansion, which is a common consequence of urbanisation throughout rural China. The second is a stratification of local labour markets, which favour Han Chinese immigrants at the expense of local ethnic minorities, and is an emerging problem in many parts of China’s ethnically complex western regions. (18)

**Land expropriations and conflict**

Land expropriations have become one of the most controversial issues in China. Every year local governments expropriate land from an average of four million people. (18) Every year tens of thousands of protests are triggered by farmers’ grievances over the compensation paid as part of compulsory acquisitions. Approximately 65% of all reported rural conflicts are caused by disputes over land requisitions, (19) and only a handful of such disputes attract national and international media attention.

As has been noted, in Zhongdian the local government, as elsewhere in China, first acquires land from farmers before it is leased to developers. It allowed county officials to quickly boost the number of urban residents while reducing the potential for the farmers’ resistance so long as the land-purchase price offered by the government seemed acceptable to them. Urban household registrations were very attractive because these provided access to urban services such as better healthcare and education, and to better welfare entitlements such as pensions.

The nature of land-related conflicts in Zhongdian has varied from village to village. In 2010, one village at a slight distance from the county seat agreed to sell a well-located tract of collective land to a local property-development company for the price of 18,000 yuan (US$3,000) per mu. The company was controlled by a local official. What the villagers did not know at the time was that the company was acquiring the land in order to resell it to the People’s Armed Police, which was looking for a site to build a new training facility. The land deal had been negotiated through an informal network that included officers in the People’s Armed Police, other local officials, the property developer, and the head of the village. When villagers learned the following year that the land-use rights were being on-sold for 80,000 yuan (US$18,500) per mu, a rival of the village leader, who is a member of another kinship group, seized the opportunity to accuse the village leader and the property developer of cheating the villagers. He led a delegation of the farmers to the county head’s office to protest the inadequacy of their initial compensation. At the county government the villagers met with sympathetic ears, not because they had a legitimate grievance in the eyes of local officials, but because the land deal had been executed by the county head’s political rivals. Unlike many other such protests in rural China, however, the villagers’ land had not been forcibly expropriated. Villagers had agreed to the deal and were satisfied with the price until they learned a year later how much their land was worth. According to a private conversation with an astute official who observed the process, if allies of the county head had been involved in the land deal he would have told the villagers to go home. Encouraged by their sympathetic reception at the county executive, however, the villagers hired a lawyer, who found an error in the paperwork related to the transaction and advised them that they might raise a lawsuit on these grounds. The county executive sent word to the company advising it that if the villagers made trouble (naoshi) the company would be held responsible. Under pressure, the company negotiated to pay an additional 2,000,000 yuan (US$350,000) to the village, which represented a large share of the developer’s profits. (20)

In Zhongdian, conflicts over land have not been as intense as in many other parts of rural China. This is largely a result of low population density. Unlike in many other parts of China, where land expropriations have forced farmers off the land, a number of villages in Zhongdian have been able to part with some acres of collective land, while retaining their most productive land and their rural lifestyles. And while forcible expropriations have been the main source of conflict, the county government’s assertions of eminent domain are decreasing. Farmland is mostly now converted for commercial use through a process of negotiation between a developer and the farmers. When an agreement has been reached, the developer applies to the Land and Resources Bureau for the necessary paperwork to be completed.

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18. For another case study on the social impacts of urbanisation on a Tibetan county town, see Jiang Bin, “Sichuan Zangqu chenzhenhua jincheng yu shehuiwenhua bianqian – yi Degexian gengqing wei ge’an” (Research on urbanisation and socio-cultural change in Sichuan’s Tibetan areas – the case of Degexian in Dege County), Boshi Lunwen (PhD Dissertation) Sichuan Daxue, 2003.
pleted. Many peri-urban farmers have profited handsomely from giving up their land, especially land that was not agriculturally productive. Those who held on to their land through the decade-long boom have made much more profit than those farmers who sold early.

**Urbanisation and the stratification of labour markets**

A much bigger problem for Zhongdian has been the impact of the tourist-based urbanisation on employment and on economic opportunities for the rural population. Until the 1990s, most economic opportunities in Shangri-la could be found in rural endeavours such as animal husbandry, forestry, and the harvesting of non-timber forest products. As the county town expanded into a regional hub for tourism, the economy restructured away from primary industry toward construction and services. But even though this created thousands of new jobs, many among the county’s predominantly rural population struggled to take advantage of the new economic opportunities. This is because locals lacked the skills needed in many of the new occupations. When I first began conducting fieldwork in Zhongdian in 2002 (during the early phase of the tourism boom), it was apparent that many of the new jobs were being filled by non-locals. A survey I did of the four largest hotels revealed that 85% of the new jobs were being filled by non-locals, even in low-skilled jobs such as housekeeping. Hotel managers were paying a premium to attract workers from the provincial capital and other regions, many of whom were Han Chinese and not local Tibetans or other ethnic minorities who were part of the tourist appeal. From a business perspective, the reasons were obvious. The skills were unavailable locally even for cleaning rooms. As a local Tibetan entrepreneur put it, “I’d like to hire locals, but I can’t run my business if I do. Locals don’t know how to do this type of work.” The demand for skills has led to a rapid increase in the numbers of non-local Han Chinese arriving to fill positions.

During the urban expansion of the past decade, the ethnic composition of the labour force in Zhongdian has become increasingly unrepresentative of the ethnic composition of the local population. While tourism has generated employment for local ethnic minorities, many of the better-paid jobs are taken by economic migrants from other parts of China. Interviews with employers and with officials from the prefecture and county office of industry and commerce revealed there were higher concentrations of Han Chinese in higher-paid middle and senior management and in specialist positions. The common explanation for this was that Han Chinese had higher levels of formal education and skills and more experience. Many of the workers recruited from outside the region are Han Chinese from different parts of the province and country and Naxi from Lijiang City, to the immediate south of Zhongdian, which created a major tourism industry more than a decade before Zhongdian. Both traditionally and today, the local populace of Lijiang is much better educated than the people of Zhongdian. Employers, officials, and educators are generally agreed that the under-representation of local ethnic minorities in higher-paid technical and managerial positions is largely a problem of skills and education. While in very small enterprises it is commonplace for employers to prefer to hire people from their home village or township, which usually meant they belonged to the same ethnic group, in the larger businesses where personnel management is more institutionalised, employers have wanted the best people they can find to do the job. In more than a decade of conducting research in Zhongdian, I found no evidence to suggest there is widespread discrimi-

24. Several interviews with local employers and officials representing the interests of local employers were conducted during 2011 and 2012.
26. Attendance rates have improved in recent years as the government is now providing cash incentives to families to keep children in school.
sands of private vocational training schools have opened, offering courses following the Global Financial Crisis-induced fiscal stimulus of 2009 and 2010. Schools are sometimes built even though there are no available, and are anyhow seen as less legitimate forms of education.

The weakness of the vocational education system is not just a problem of policy implementation at the local level. It is also a problem of conflicting policies at the central level. The performance of leading local officials is evaluated against only a handful of indicators, the most important of which is the pace of economic growth. In their endless pursuit of higher regional GDP growth, local officials have a tendency to channel education funds into school construction. This tendency is further reinforced by opportunities for kickbacks in construction projects. Over the past decade, I have seen dozens of schools in Zhongdian built and rebuilt, and each year the physical infrastructure is more and more impressive. Indeed, there was an orgy of construction following the Global Financial Crisis-induced fiscal stimulus of 2009 and 2010. Schools are sometimes built even though there are no teachers and students to fill them.

In China’s major cities vocational training has made stronger advances in recent years. In many cases the private sector has filled the demand. Thousands of private vocational training schools have opened, offering courses in a variety of technical trades. Such schools, however, are profit-driven so there is little incentive for them to set up operations in rural regions such as Zhongdian where few local people can afford to pay for training. Because of this lack of training facilities, large employers in Zhongdian conduct their own in-house training. However, employers acknowledge that this training is focused on intermediate and advanced skills. They do not provide training to rural youth with little or no skills. According to the owner of four local hotels, speaking in 2011, “it simply takes too long to train rural youth to the level we need in our work. We would have to teach them how to shower every day and how to dress. They lack too much basic knowledge. It works out cheaper for us to hire workers from other places even though we have to offer higher salaries to attract them.”

Concluding comments

Rural urbanisation in Zhongdian began in the mid-1990s as a consequence of the decision to promote tourism as the cornerstone of the local economy. Within the space of a few years, however, economic, fiscal, and administrative incentives ensured that urbanisation became not just a by-product of economic change, but an end in itself for local authorities. The county government was motivated to promote urban development because of the lucrative fees generated by land transactions and the taxes it could impose on urban businesses in construction, retail, and residential housing. Zhongdian officials were also motivated to pursue urbanisation as a means to attain a high GDP, a key criterion in the performance assessment of county leaders. A third motivation was the desire by county level leaders to elevate the county to “city” status, which would bring additional revenues to county government coffers and a higher status and rank for county officials.

Urbanisation in Zhongdian created winners and losers. Many local officials and land developers made handsome profits. Many local residents profited, too, especially those with properties located close to the urban centre, who benefitted from high land values. Some have invested the profits in their own businesses. Even some of the rural households located near Zhongdian have been entrepreneurial and have started guesthouses and restaurants. Some other local residents became networked to the local government, which provided their families with new employment opportunities.

Although land expropriations sometimes resulted in conflicts as in other parts of rural China, especially when farmers believed they were not adequately compensated for land, in the villages surrounding Zhongdian a low population density meant land could be ceded without destroying rural livelihoods, which minimised the potential for serious conflict. In many cases peri-urban farmers were able to access the advantages of urbanisation without sacrificing the benefits of rural living, a phenomenon Andrew Kipnis similarly notes in his article on the changing lives of villagers on the other side of the country in rapidly urbanising Zouping County. Other winners include urban-based locals who have been able to establish small businesses such as hostels and restaurants.

The biggest losers of rural urbanisation in Zhongdian are the current generation of rural ethnic minority youths who aspire to an urban life, but who are ill-equipped to take advantage of Zhongdian’s economic boom. Many of the young people find themselves stuck, seeing no future in subsistence farming, but without the skills and knowledge needed to access alternative careers. As economic migrants flood into the region there is increased risk of Tibetans and other local ethnic minorities becoming marginalised in their own local economy. Even though many of them are finding employment, they are concentrated in low-skilled and low-paid positions, while better-paid jobs are being taken by outsiders, many of whom are Han Chinese.

Central and local government policies are to blame for the stratification of labour markets. While fiscal arrangements and the cadre evaluation system have created incentives for local officials to promote the urbanisation of rural areas, they have not created incentives for local officials to promote inclusiveness in the new urban-based economy. This is the case even though a majority of the prefecture’s and county’s leaders are themselves members of ethnic minority groups. The Shangri-la county government has made some effort to promote local businesses, but it has not been able to effectively respond to skill shortages. This has led to large-scale in-migration of Han and the marginalisation of their own local minority groups. While Shangri-la is only one county in southwest China, there is evidence to sug-

30. This, of course, is how vocational education was delivered in the not-too-distant past in many advanced industrialised countries, including Australia and the United States of America.
32. See the article by Andrew Kipnis in this same issue, “Urbanisation in Between: Rural traces in a rapidly growing and industrialising County City.”
33. There are a large number of non-Han employees in local government. Although highest authority – the Party Secretary – is usually Han Chinese, the head of government and of most government departments in Zhongdian are non-Han. While international scholars generally agree that China’s system of ethnic regional autonomy does not provide meaningful autonomy to local ethnic groups, ethnic minorities are generally well represented in government in regions that are officially designated as “ethnic autonomous regions” (minzu zizhiqu).
gest that urbanisation of other rural areas in western China has had similar negative consequences, contributing to an increase in violent conflict.\(^{34}\)

A key challenge lies in reforming education policies. The education system is failing many ethnic minority youth because it does not provide them with the skills they need to find employment as towns expand and rural communities shrink. Local governments lack the awareness and capacity needed to provide effective vocational training. Even when local government leaders recognise the challenge, there are insufficient incentives for them to invest in new approaches to education. Investments are instead concentrated in school construction because GDP-boosting measures are a more certain route to career advancement. Unless the central government intervenes to ensure that a larger percentage of education funds are invested in vocational training and alternative education, urbanisation will likely continue to be associated with the economic marginalisation of ethnic minorities.

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34. See, for example, Andrew Fischer, State Growth and Social Exclusion in Tibet: Challenges of Recent Economic Growth, Oslo, NIAS Press, 2005; and Matthew D. Moneyhon, “China’s Great Western Development Project in Xinjiang: Economic Palliative, or Political Trojan Horse?”, Denver Journal of International Law & Policy, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2003, pp. 491-520.
The Guangdong Model of Urbanisation:

Collective village land and the making of a new middle class

HIM CHUNG AND JONATHAN UNGER

ABSTRACT: In some parts of China – and especially in Guangdong Province in southern China – rural communities have retained ownership of much of their land when its use is converted into urban neighbourhoods or industrial zones. In these areas, the rural collectives, rather than disappearing, have converted themselves into property companies and have been re-energised and strengthened as rental income pours into their coffers. The native residents, rather than being relocated, usually remain in the village’s old residential area. As beneficiaries of the profits generated by their village collective, they have become a new property class, often living in middle-class comfort on their dividends and rents. How this operates – and the major economic and social ramifications – is examined through on-site research in four communities: an industrialised village in the Pearl River delta; an urban neighbourhood in Shenzhen with its own subway station, whose land is still owned and administered by rural collectives; and two villages-in-the-city (chengzhongcun) in Guangzhou’s new downtown districts, where fancy housing estates and high-rise office blocks owned by village collectives are springing up alongside newly rebuilt village temples and lineage halls.

KEYWORDS: urbanisation, village collectives, land retention, Guangdong.

Origins of the Guangdong Model

Guangdong was the first province in post-Mao China to experience a wave of export-based industrialisation, due to its proximity to Hong Kong. In 1979 Shenzhen, a small county capital on the border with Hong Kong, was declared a Special Economic Zone, and it rapidly began to expand. Initially, the zone authorities expropriated the land needed for city streets, new neighbourhoods, and industrial parks, offering modest compensation, but this encountered resistance from local villages. Especially since Shenzhen was in the national limelight, the authorities soon decided it was better to avoid confrontation, and so they enlisted cooperation by giving villages a stake in property redevelopment. While the Shenzhen authorities continued to appropriate village fields, the rural collectives were allowed to retain a portion of the land to develop themselves, and villagers were allowed to retain their housing sites.

As Hong Kong companies in the 1980s began seeking sites beyond Shenzhen to construct factories, villages got an even better deal. In the 1970s under Mao, China’s villages and rural townships had been officially encouraged to "self-reliantly" (zilǐ gēngshèng) develop small industry and sidelines. The new opportunity in the 1980s to construct factory buildings on village land for rent to foreign companies was perceived in this light by village and local higher-level officials. In the mid to late 1980s, travellers on the roads leading from Shenzhen toward Guangzhou could see frenetic construction throughout the area as village after village competed "self-reliantly" to throw up factory buildings to rent out. While village residential areas remained in place, the agricultural land was becoming covered by a crazy-quilt of small improvised industrial parks.

Under Mao, this land had been owned collectively by “production teams”: clusters of 15-50 households who worked the land together and divided the harvest earnings based on how much labour each member had contributed. Even after farmers turned to household farming in the early 1980s the production teams (re-titled villager small groups [cūnmin xiàozǔ]) retained ownership of the land, with member families independently allowed to cultivate the land apportioned to them without any rental charge. When presented with an opportunity to rent land out as factory sites, in some cases villager small groups did so as the collective owners, while in other cases, in order to create a larger and more effectively planned industrial park, the villager small groups agreed to pool their land into a village-wide property collective.

On the far side of Guangzhou, at a distance beyond where foreign manufacturers were willing to locate, industrialisation of a different sort sprouted in the Pearl River Delta. Local villagers there were allowed to establish small private factories starting in the mid-1980s, which sometimes grew during the following decades into substantial companies. From the start, the owners paid rent for their factory land sites either to a villager small group or village-wide collective. In short, local collective retention of industrialised land became the accepted pattern in that part of Guangdong, too.

Elsewhere in China, urban expansion and these types of industrialisation arose at a later period. Officials there could look south and see that land conversion in Guangdong had been highly profitable. Rather than follow in Guangdong’s footsteps and let grassroots rural collectives gain the profits, authorities outside Guangdong often have used powers of eminent domain to force villager small groups to give up their land at a low price as agricultural land. The authorities have then rezoned the land to establish an industrial zone or urban district and have rented or resold the land at a huge mark-up. Doing so has provided them with a major source of revenue. Rural protests over these land grabs have constituted the largest source of mass disturbances in China.

To be sure, outside of Guangdong many villager groups and villages have been allowed to convert agricultural land into small factory zones and have garnered the profits, and some cities outside Guangdong have followed Shenzhen’s formula and have allowed urbanised village collectives to develop a portion of their land themselves. Notably, too, within Guangdong requisitioning of rural land sometimes occurs, and sometimes involves abuses of power and under-compensation. But many of these abuses are in areas of Guangdong that lie at a distance from the Pearl River Delta region and, like other parts of China, began developing later. The delta, the densely populated core economic region of Guangdong that includes the megacities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen, sits apart from much of the rest of China in the type of property development that has occurred and where profits have flowed. As will be seen, collective land retention there during urbanisation has major economic and social ramifications.

**Village collectives in the guise of shareholding companies**

Ofﬁcially, the land in these Guangdong villages is no longer owned by a rural collective but rather by a shareholding company. The transfer of land rights to such shareholding companies originated in Nanhai County in the heart of the Pearl River Delta in the 1980s, and gradually became the norm throughout the region. Although on paper this entailed the transfer of collective assets into the hands of a registered private company, villagers have continued to share in the ownership in a fashion similar to a rural collective. The change provided them with a distinct advantage. Had the land legally remained collective, it would have been more vulnerable to a future takeover by higher-level authorities. Moreover, as the village became industrialised and urbanised and attracted new residents from across China, these might become eligible to a share in the village-level collective’s prosperity if the Chinese government were to decide in future to allow migrants to gain permanent residence rights in the community. But no matter how national residence regulations may change in years to come, the shift of all the landed assets into a private shareholding company perpetuates the native villagers’ exclusive ownership and control over the territory’s land and collective investments.

This legal shift in ownership did not have much effect on the local perception of collective property rights, nor did it have much effect on local authority structures. In fact, it is often difficult today to draw a precise line between a village’s political administration and the shareholding company. At all of the sites we know of, the company leadership is the same as the village leadership. The Party secretary of the village usually became the Party secretary and CEO of the village’s shareholding company, and village ofﬁcials occupy the seats of the company’s board of directors.

We have conducted research in four such villages. In keeping with urbanisation, the four villages no longer are titled villages. Instead, they are now all officially titled shequ, which is the administrative title for the lowest level of urban administration in China. In a city, a shequ contains a local ofﬁce staffed by a few low-level city employees to handle household registrations, look after households on welfare, and the like. Instead, in this Guangdong model the far wider range of responsibilities that are held by village administrations in China’s countryside normally remain within the purview of the original leadership group of the former village. All four of our sites retain their own public-security forces (zhi’an dui), “self-reliantly” staffed and locally controlled, and paid for out of the former village’s own collective funds. The leadership bodies of the four former villages “self-reliantly” take economic initiatives; engage in local planning of public spaces; establish local regulations and rules that are tantamount to local laws; and levy their own fees – essentially local taxes – on local businesses to cover a range of local public services such as garbage collection and street lighting. All four tend to their local constituents’ healthcare and subsidise the schools attended by the native villagers’ children. These are not the types of matters that urban shequ offices have the authority and funds to handle. These former villages do. All four locales are able to turn to the shareholding companies’ collective assets to help pay part of the expenses for these various initiatives, since the companies hold a substantial amount of property income. Most of this income, though, has gone into annual dividends for each villager. And to the extent that the local populace and leadership have had a hand in how the shares have been allocated and how the dividends get distributed, principles have been followed that derive from the Mao-era collectives.

How this operates, the interesting and important variations that have been devised, and the effects of collective property ownership on the local economy, society, and political structures can be observed in the four villages we have investigated. Two of these villages (Chen Village and Xinxian) have been visited repeatedly over several decades, and we returned to study them for this article. One (Liede) has been researched by one of us since 2007, and one (Liontou) was first visited during 2011-12 specifically for the purposes of this article.

**Chen Village, a heavily industrialised territory**

In previous times, Chen Village was a relatively poor agricultural village at the southeastern edge of the Pearl River Delta, the home of 250 families

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3. Two famous early examples are Huai village in Jiangsu Province and Daquzhuang near Tianjin. Erroneously, they have widely been considered anomalies and as isolated throwbacks to the collective Mao era.

4. This includes the well-publicised cases of Toupu and Wukan villages, neither of which lie near the Pearl River Delta region.
who shared a common patrilineal ancestry and surname. Although livelihoods improved during the period of Mao’s rule, it was only during the 1970s that villagers could afford to eat vegetables and meat on a regular basis and stopped going barefoot in winter. (9)

The surge of industrial development flowing outward along the roads from Shenzhen reached the village in the early 1990s, and by 1994 factory construction was underway on a number of Chen Village’s fields. Under Mao, Chen Village had contained five production teams, and the division of the land ownership among five groups now got in the way of efficient development. It quickly became apparent that land-use planning was needed, so that streets could be laid out properly, with some land zoned for industrial use, other land for public infrastructure, and yet other land for commercial purposes and rental housing. The government of the township (formerly a commune) stepped in to declare that all of the five villager small groups should combine into one land collective. Agreement was soon reached among the five villager groups and the village administration. Within the year, all of the fields were covered by construction sites, and the village government entrepreneurially began excavating the low hills to the village’s rear, more than doubling the space that could be occupied by factories.

Regional authorities soon directed that all of the village’s land and collective investment was to be designated the Chen Village Shareholding Company, Ltd. (Chen Cun gufen youxian gongsi). The terminology suggested a privati-sed Western-style corporate entity in which stock shares can be bought, sold, and inherited. That was not the case. It was left up to each village how to distribute and regulate shares, and Chen Village did so in a fashion that did not resemble stock shares in a capitalist company. Instead, the new shareholding system reflected the communal values of the socialist era and reproduced how the Mao-era production teams had conceived of team membership. Children born then to team members gained a share in the team assets and were entitled to a child’s portion of harvested grain each year, with adults allocated a higher portion. Young women who married out of the team and community lost team membership and thus their share of team assets, as did people who died and families who moved away.

Similarly, in the new Chen Village Shareholding Company, Ltd., as soon as an infant was born it received a half share of stock, which converted into a full share at the young person’s 18th birthday, and when a person died or his stock share disappeared. A woman who married out to another community lost her stock share, but instantly gained a share in the community she was marrying into. Elderly Chens received a top-up in their dividends, so as to uphold the Chinese tradition of respect for age. Stock shares, in short, were not permanent and inheritable possessions, but rather were equated with community membership, and dividends were commensurate with age-status within the community. Across the Pearl River delta, villages were adopting a similar vision and equivalent methods.

In 2004, the regional government finally decreed that ownership of a share was to be permanent and inheritable. After this, no new shares in Chen Village were issued when children were born, nor taken away when a person died. But the Chen Village shareholding company put into place procedures that made it difficult to sell shares, and impossible to sell them to a non-Chen. The Chens and their descendants are, collectively, to remain the sole owners of the company, and thus of all the land within the village’s territory.

The shareholding property company and the village administration are, to all effects, the two halves of a single organisation. The Communist Party secretary of Chen Village simultaneously serves as CEO of the company, and the village head, who ranks No. 2 in the village Party organisation, is the company’s deputy head. The remainder of the board is composed of other leading village officials and the heads of the five former villager small groups. The village government headquarters and the company headquarters occupy the same compound in adjoining buildings: under the same leadership, one takes care of the village’s economic holdings, and the other administers the territory and the tens of thousands of factory employees and others who live within it. Unlike some other regions of China, where rural collectives and village administrations simultaneously lose both land and control over territory, here both were retained, and the effect is mutually reinforcing. The Chens are both the collective landlords and the rulers of their domain.

Not all of the company’s shares belong to individual Chens. While their own stock shares and dividends derive from the agricultural fields that had previously belonged to production teams, which now provide a very substantial ground-rental income from factory buildings, other portions of the village’s land, including fish ponds and the now-flattened hills, had belonged to the village (Mao-era “brigade”) administration. This expanse of land has been converted into shares held by the company in behalf of the local Chen populace as a group, and the dividends from these shares are supposed to be used for their common welfare. Since the company leadership that determines how the collective income gets spent is the same as the village government leadership, ordinary Chen villagers do not always bother to distinguish between the company and the village government, and often just say the “brigade” (dadü) is the benefactor.

The village government also has its own sources of revenue. In particular, it levies an annual “management fee” on factories, which is effectively a village tax. Since Chen Village today contains several hundred factories, some of them very sizeable, the revenues are considerable. Most of it gets spent on rubbish collection, road repairs, street lighting, and a village public security corps that safeguards the factory zone and residential streets. But some revenue also gets spent to improve the livelihood of the Chens. Through the combined coffers of the company and village government, the village leadership is able to provide a mini-welfare state for them. They receive free medical check-ups and heavily subsidised medical care. Their children sit in luxurious school buildings that exclude the children of non-locals. The elderly who need special care can enter an old people’s home reserved for Chens. The villagers even get to go on heavily subsidised group tourist holidays, both within China and abroad.

The shareholding company, for its part, provides them with substantial personal cash incomes in the shape of annual dividends. The company obtains the money by building and leasing out dozens of large factory buildings and dormitories and also through the ground rents paid by corporations that have leased land on 30-year contracts and erected their own factories. The dividend income alone is enough to provide the villagers with a living standard superior to what most urban Chinese enjoy.

This is supplemented by a guaranteed easy job for all Chens of working age. Every factory is required to hire one of the Chens at a salary about one and a half times higher than one of its workers receives. The invented job holds the grandiose title of Chinese-Side Factory Director, the main responsibility of which is to serve as a liaison between the factory and village gov-
enjoying the security of a mini-welfare state, most of the Chens do not feel ancestral ownership of the territory, through the construction of two new Chen ancestral halls. One of these is austere, built of solid dark wood. The carved interior. The other is gaudy, with a fortune in glittering gold leaf adorning its intricately controlled territory.

With their new-found prosperity, members of the Chen community no longer live in the twisting lanes of small, old, dingy houses that they used to occupy. They rent these out to migrant workers. The shareholding company provided a free block of nearby land on which the village government organised the construction of a fancy gated residential estate. Behind high fences, it contains ten high-rise apartment buildings, playgrounds, a large social-club building, and a giant swimming pool, with two stories of underground parking. The new flats were all sold at the cost of construction to Chen families. Only Chens are allowed to live in the housing complex. They have sealed themselves off in their privileged lifestyle from the tens of thousands of immigrants who today work and live in Chen-owned and controlled territory.

The village government flaunts the superiority of the Chens, and their long ancestral ownership of the territory, through the construction of two new Chen ancestral halls. One of these is austere, built of solid dark wood. The other is gaudy, with a fortune in glittering gold leaf adorning its intricately carved interior.

As landlords and as recipients of dividends and of salaries for fake jobs, enjoying the security of a mini-welfare state, most of the Chens do not feel inclined to work for a living. They can afford to spend their days in leisurely pursuits. A lot of mahjong gets played. They make rounds of visits to friends. They drink tea. If middle aged or older, they had engaged in gruelling farm labour for part of their lives, and so leisure seems a luxury. They have become a propertied, leisureed middle class of a new form, living off dividends provided by their former rural collective and off the monopoly opportunities open only to Chens to possess lucrative rental properties.

**Longtou, (6) an urban residential district in Shenzhen**

A variant of the Chen Village story is found in the northern reaches of Shenzhen City. The area lies 40 minutes from the city centre by fast elevated commuter rail, with a subway-style train arriving every few minutes. A train station deposits passengers in the centre of Longtou, and the tens of thousands of people who rent flats here are able to travel every day to Shenzhen industrial zones to work. Longtou contains a couple of small factory areas where some of the tenants work, but the city government has designated this section of Shenzhen as largely residential.

Though built within the past couple! of decades, much of the grid of bustling city streets lined by six-storey apartment buildings looks prematurely run-down. This is largely a working-class area containing families who have flooded in from other parts of China. Mandarin is very often heard in the streets.

Longtou used to be a cluster of 15 dispersed Hakka hamlets, each surrounded by its fields. The Hakka arrived in Guangdong about a thousand years ago, long after the Cantonese speakers of Guangdong, and as late-comers they normally occupy marginally productive land.

At the beginning of the 1960s after the collapse of the Great Leap Forward, when the Chinese government established a new system of rural administration and land ownership, the 15 hamlets each became a production team, and thus a collective landowner. Together, the 15 hamlets were organised into the Longtou “brigade” (what is today termed an administrative village) under a brigade government and Party committee.

When urbanisation first began to engulf the area a few decades ago, the area was far enough from the centre of Shenzhen that the city did not appropriate some of the land. The 15 hamlets had no desire to give up their collective land by pooling it in an artificially concocted administrative village, and the higher levels of local government did not press the point. Instead, it was arranged that each hamlet would create its own shareholding company that gained legal ownership of all the hamlet land. The administrative village formed its own shareholding company, based on the property and landholdings that had belonged to the brigade. The hamlet companies come under the purview of the Longtou village shareholding company, forming a very loose sort of nested conglomerate with different sets of shareholders and a considerable degree of autonomy for the hamlet companies.

This is reflected in the administrative structure of the area today. Whereas Chen Village officially comprises one shequ (neighbourhood community) housing a thousand Chens and some 60,000 migrant residents, each of Longtou’s 15 hamlets today is a separate shequ accommodating, on average, 200 native hamlet residents and some 10,000 newcomers. Out of its income from property leases and rentals, a hamlet company sets aside a couple of million yuan each year to pay for street cleaners, a security force.

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6. The name has been altered to preserve the privacy of local residents.
to police local streets, and a range of casual workers, as well as a recreation centre for the native elderly. It hires local hamlet members as salaried managers of the company and of these neighbourhood functions.

The hamlet and village-level companies use their property incomes to distribute distinctly different types of benefits to the local Hakka residents. The hamlet companies are the sole providers of cash dividends. The village company heavily subsidises a city-run school open only to native Hakka children, and covers all of the native villagers’ medical insurance and urban retirement-fund payments.

Similar to Chen Village, hamlet members hold exclusive access to land on which to build rental apartment buildings. Mr. Wang, a Hakka resident, receives about 7,000 yuan per month in profit from this very advantageous arrangement. In 2011 he personally also received 31,000 yuan in hamlet company dividends, a sum equivalent to what each Chen Villager received. Mr. Wang’s wife and children separately received substantial dividends. Like Chen Villagers, the Hakka families in the Longtou hamlets collectively belong to a well-off proprietoried middle class.

The native families now possess an urban registration (hukou), but one of the Hakka residents says it is of no use to them: “What we care about is our hamlet membership, which gives us lots of dividends and other advantages.” Indeed, the living standard and welfare benefits enjoyed by these former farmers are considerably better than those of Shenzhen’s urban-registered populace as a whole.

When planning the new mass-transit rail system, the city was aware that the blocks of land directly next to the Longtou station were of particular value and could be redeveloped into an upscale residential and shopping zone. In Hong Kong, next door to Shenzhen, the public mass-transit train system has been financed by taking over and very profitably redeveloping the property that lies directly above subway stations and next to the station entrances. Shenzhen has done something similar. On both sides of the elevated rail line, where the station’s four sets of escalators deliver passengers into Longtou, the Shenzhen district (qu) government has appropriated two extensive blocks of land and compensated the hamlets. When we last visited Longtou in 2012, construction was underway on these large sites. In the Guangdong model, the government normally lets local village residents reap substantial benefits from urbanisation and industrialisation, but within a framework that takes account of the city’s and region’s own financial priorities and needs. It is, in a sense, a local interpretation of “harmonious society.”

Xinxiang, a Guangzhou village–inside-the-city (7)

Until the latter half of the 1980s, Xinxiang was a suburban village that supplied vegetables to Guangzhou. It had a population of 4,000, divided among 14 former production teams. The great bulk of the populace lived in a single concentrated village of tightly packed one- and two-storey houses, and two production teams occupied a large hamlet located across an expanse of fields. By the early 1990s, none of the agricultural fields remained. All of the land was under urban concrete and asphalt.

As Guangzhou City rapidly expanded outwards during the 1980s and 1990s, it adopted the system first developed in Shenzhen. The city government enlisted the cooperation of the local villages whose land was being enveloped by giving them a stake in property redevelopment. Unlike Longtou, where the hamlets have retained ownership of almost all the land other than thoroughfares and the land blocks immediately next to the station, the Guangzhou government normally appropriated most village fields for new city blocks of office buildings and high-rise apartments. But the municipal government left a portion of the land for the village collectives to develop and also let the village residents retain their own housing sites and remain in their homes. These residential areas, crisscrossed by narrow village lanes, are popularly called villages-in-the-city. Guangzhou contains 138 of them, and according to one source, as of 2006 the land that they retained occupied a total of 87.5 square kilometres, more than a fifth of the built-up area of Guangzhou. (9)

In Xinxiang, the village collective was converted into a shareholding company in 1988. The city gave much of the compensation for expropriated land to the new shareholding company rather than to individual villagers. On the portions of agricultural land retained by the company to develop, it constructed a range of high-rise urban premises that it still owns and manages, including two hotels and a number of restaurants. The diverse properties and businesses today generate profits for the shareholding company of about 200 million yuan a year, much of which is distributed to villagers as dividends.

In Xinxiang, the number of shares obtained by each of the villagers depended upon how many years they had laboured in a production team and in post-Mao agriculture. Mr. and Mrs. Li, a 70-year-old couple who were long-time farmers, each hold 22 shares, and each received about 18,000 yuan in dividends in 2011, plus a generous cash medical allowance. But the lion’s share of the Li’s income derives from renting out flats. Since the city did not bother to regulate villages-in-the-city such as Xinxiang, residents during the 1990s knocked down their one-to-two-storey homes and illegally erected narrow five-to-eight story apartment buildings in their place. The owner lives in one flat, and migrants from the countryside — many of them clerks in downtown shops, construction workers, blue-collar maintenance workers, urban street cleaners — crowd into smaller flats on the buildings’ other floors. It is a lucrative arrangement. A building in Xinxiang normally generates a rental income of over 10,000 yuan a month.

As early as 2000, Guangzhou’s 138 villages-in-the-city were estimated to house more than three million people. (10) They quickly had become chaotic landscapes of narrow lanes squeezed between overcrowded apartment buildings, with very little planning and no observance of city building regulations. Within the 300 mu (20 hectares) of Xinxiang residential land, more than 1,400 of these illegal apartment buildings sprang up. To maximise every available bit of space, the owners usually built out over the lanes from the second floor upward, leaving scant room between the buildings, sometimes barely enough to swing open a window. In these villages-in-the-city, the street level is perpetually in the shade. Electric wires are strung haphazardly between buildings and up the outside walls. After drenching rains, the heavily populated “villages” sometimes become barely habitable, since they often lack sufficient drainage systems. (10)

7. The name of the locality has been altered to prevent identification.
9. Ibid., p. 123.
Tenants arrive from throughout China, and as a result of unstable employment they tend to stay only a short time. Inquiries were carried out in the Xinxiang hamlet composed of two former production teams, and building owners reported that tenants normally stay only three to four months, and few stay longer than a year. While the great majority of tenants are law abiding, the unregulated character of a "village" also attracts criminal elements and a range of illegal activity such as prostitution. The native residents of the hamlet are of mixed minds. On the one hand, the outsiders make possible the building owners' prosperity. At the same time, the locally born populace were now living in a disorderly, unhygienic, and not entirely safe environment. With the generous rental income from their houses, many of the native young people have moved out, leaving behind the elderly.

The city government ostensibly took over administration of Xinxiang in 2005. The village government was formally dissolved, and the former hamlet was placed in the hands of a Residents' Committee (jumin weiyuanhui). This is the authority structure of Xinxiang. The residence committee office, located on the hamlet's main shopping street opposite a large covered marketplace owned by the shareholding company, contains ten municipal personnel, including one policeman. But it does not receive enough funding from the city to provide sufficient public services.

All but one of the 14 members of the village leadership shifted full-time into salaried posts at the shareholding company. The former village head serves as chair of the board of directors, and the former Party secretary is one of the directors as well as the company's Party secretary.

The phrase "shareholding company" highlights its corporate organisation and profit-making dimension, but it is an inaccurate term since its role extends far beyond that of a company. After the formal abolition of the village government, the company became the essential organisational core and authority structure of Xinxiang. The residence committee office, composed of civil servants from "outside," found it extremely difficult to penetrate the blood ties and relationships of the native populace, and in effect, the office largely serves as the company's assistant, rather than the other way around.

The company's financial resources (read: the village collective's resources) have been mobilised to provide the hamlet neighbourhood's public services. For instance, the single policeman assigned to the residence office cannot handle law and order in a vast transient hamlet-neighbourhood of more than 10,000 adult residents. Instead he serves as a conduit to the city police, while the Xinxiang shareholding company hires and controls a security corps to patrol the streets at a cost to the company of a million yuan a year, as well as garbage collectors and street sweepers. It pays the electricity bill for the city's residence committee office and provides an allowance to the office to hire extra personnel. In particular, local villagers have been hired through these funds to work at a Neighbourhood Management Office where disputes between landlords and tenants are handled. Much as in Longtou, the company also supports a range of services for the native community such as an old people's activities centre and a heavily subsidised school open only to native children. In an interview in 2012, an executive of the company observed that these multifaceted roles have given rise to a Guangzhou saying regarding the 138 villages-in-the-city: "The shareholding company runs the neighbourhood."

Its provision of services does not make it popular among the local villagers, who complain of a lack of accountancy and transparency. By official regulation, the shareholding company is supposed to hold leadership elections every three years, but no election has ever been held. With control over a great deal of money, the company/community leadership has entrenched itself in a self-perpetuating, powerful position. The feeling of distrust came to a head when Xinxiang became ripe for redevelopment. Land has become too valuable to retain housing for migrants in structures only five to eight stories high. Far more money potentially can be earned by converting the most favourably located villages-in-the-city into towering office buildings and high-rise apartment estates for Guangzhou’s well-to-do. The main village section of Xinxiang sits on more valuable land than the hamlet, which is further from the CBD, and so the main village section is being redeveloped earlier. Only the hamlet remains intact, an island of a couple hundred illegal apartment buildings. Within a few more years, it too will be redeveloped.

The municipal authorities have been anxious to promote redevelopment of the villages-in-the-city, since they have disliked the disorder and lack of planning regulations in the warrens of slum-like apartment buildings. The Xinxiang indigenous residents agree. They made clear in interviews that they would far rather live in an upscale, modern, safe community. Thus when the opportunity arose to profitably convert the village residential territory to other uses, the city, the shareholding company, and local residents welcomed it. No-one gave any consideration to the migrant tenants, who outnumber the indigenous villagers by about 20 to one. They work nearby, and redeveloping Xinxiang deprives them of the only affordable housing available to them.

The chaotic construction of jerry-built blocks of flats to house migrant workers was, in short, only the first phase of urbanisation inside the villages-in-the-city. This first phase had been carried out privately – unregulated petty capitalism run wild. The second phase, in contrast, entails a major re-assertion of collective economic initiative. The ground underlying the apartment buildings has been collectively owned from the period of Mao-era collectivisation in the 1950s up to the present, and by knocking down all the structures on it to create a huge empty stretch of collective land, the shareholding company can participate in coordinated property development on a vast scale. Several other villages-in-the-city are taking redevelopment
steps in a very similar fashion, and many others are likely to follow suit. Guangzhou is witnessing a type of property development not normally seen elsewhere in the world, with interesting economic, political, and societal implications.

Redevelopment has brought sharply into focus the multiple roles played by the Xinxiang shareholding company. The first is as the representative of all indigenous villagers. A second is as a power broker situated between the government and the former villagers, and the third is as a business firm wanting to undertake profitable activities. In that third role, its active involvement in redevelopment has included employing consultants and developer, submitting planning applications, seeking financial support, negotiating with planning authorities, and communicating with indigenous villagers. In 2007, when the shareholding company was authorised to launch redevelopment, negotiations between different stakeholders began immediately at two levels: within the village and between the company and city authorities.

A shared interest in favour of redevelopment between the villagers and the shareholding company did not generate a stable collaborative relationship. It was a case of both collaboration and confrontation. The villagers’ desire to maximise their own income from the redevelopment project generated demands to publicly audit the collective assets. This information had never been released to the villagers, and some of them expressed worries that some of the assets might be privatised by local cadres during redevelopment. Before they made a decision on redevelopment, villagers pushed the company to clarify the ownership of properties and explain the way that collective assets are managed, the allocation of collective revenues, and how these would be affected by redevelopment. When the company failed to respond, crowds of villagers demonstrated at the entrance to Xinxiang Village, demanding that the shareholding company publicise its financial records.

They also put forward a second type of demand. In the company’s negotiations with the city, the company was requesting that it be allowed to build a high proportion of commercial property and a low amount of residential property in order to maximise revenue. Many villagers opposed this for a specific reason. Their free-of-charge occupation of their homes and the income generated from renting out flats were forms of livelihood under their own personal control, and they insisted this be retained after redevelopment. Rather than become very heavily dependent on the company, which they distrusted, they preferred to continue to collect rents themselves directly from tenants. They therefore demanded that a high number of fancy flats should be constructed, and that a cluster of flats should be handed over to each of them so that they could live in one and personally rent out the others. They suggested a formula that was referred to as “inch-to-inch rehousing”: for each metre of flats they currently owned, they wanted to control an equal area of flats in the new dispensation.

The dispute between the company and villagers deadlock the company’s negotiations with the city and led the government to intervene. Under pressure both from the city and populace, the shareholding company capitulated. It released the demanded information and organised three household surveys starting in 2009 to elicit opinions on redevelopment. For 35 to 51 stories are being built. Some are joint office-residential towers, in order to fit 4,258 luxury flats into the project. When construction is complete, ownership of all of this property will belong to the shareholding company. This operates in practice will be observed in the article's fourth case study, Liede village.

Liede (11), the pioneer in high-class collective redevelopment of a village-in-the-city

Liede lies along the bank of the Pearl River close to the opposite edge of the city’s brand-new central business district. An even more populous village than Xinxiang, it has about 7,800 indigenous residents in 3,170 households. Despite its desirable location, its village collective was not incorporated as a shareholding company until 2002. Like Xinxiang, until redevelopment the villagers made most of their income by constructing a vast, ugly maze of cheaply-built apartment buildings where their homes had stood, for rental to many tens of thousands of migrants.

Liede became the first village in Guangzhou to implement redevelopment. This was not through the initiative of its leaders, but rather because doing so fit into the Guangzhou government’s agenda. A major new bridge over the Pearl River needed to be built at Liede to link the new CBD to the southern half of Guangzhou, and this required resumption of land from Liede, splitting the residential village in half. As a result of this high-profile bridge project, Liede appeared on the radar of Guangzhou’s mayor, and a deputy mayor was assigned to lead the conversion of Liede from a crowded eyesore into a riverside show spot. To break through the financial obstacles to redevelopment, a green light was given to Liede to sell a corner of the village’s land in 2007 for 4.6 billion yuan (US$740 million), and the city administration declined to tax the transaction. (12)

11. Since Liede was well publicised when its conversion into a fashionable area occurred, it is not feasible to conceal its identity, and so we have retained the village’s real name.
As in Xinxiang, villagers were reluctant to sacrifice rental incomes from their houses and depend entirely on the dividends distributed by the village shareholding company. A scenario similar to Xinxiang got played out, with protests and rapid concessions. An inch-to-inch rehousing policy was adopted. Under city government encouragement and pressure, Liede got its planning proposal officially approved in only three months, and within another three months achieved consensus for the compensation plan – a series of processes that took Xinxiang three years to achieve.

As a first stage, a new very up-scale residential area was hurriedly put under construction. A huge residential estate containing 37 lofty apartment buildings was completed and occupied within two years. Stage two is to create a large deluxe commercial district on the vast tract of remaining land, and one of Hong Kong’s largest and most prestigious property developers was hired to make the plans and organise its construction. When completed in 2014, it will contain a 5-star hotel, architecturally distinguished office towers, and a large fancy shopping mall and entertainment centre. The entire complex will be wholly owned by the Liede shareholding company.

The new huge housing estate is set in fenced-in grounds amidst landscaping and playgrounds and boasts a large residents’ club house, a huge pool, and other amenities of the good life. The Liede village households were each allocated several flats: one to live in and the others to rent out to successful professionals and junior and middle-level executives of nearby corporations in the CBD. It is an unusual arrangement. The villagers live among the high-paid well-educated tenants as neighbours, sharing their lifestyle, yet they remain an entirely different social and economic group. They are more low status than the urban tenants, but also can perceive of themselves as high status in one sense: they are, collectively, the owners of this estate and the territory it sits on.

Xinxiang will follow the same path as Liede, with a similar stress upon total collective ownership. An executive of the Xinxiang Development Company observed in a 2012 interview:

After Xinxiang’s redevelopment, all of the flats will be collectively owned by the company. None of them will be for sale. This arrangement basically follows the Liede model, where individual villagers enjoy only the right to use the apartments to live in or for rental purposes, but can never sell them. Under collective ownership, outsiders will only be allowed to rent an apartment, if they can afford it.

At both Liede and Xinxiang, the new-found principle is that what remains of the village territory is ancestral and inviolable, and will be so in perpetuity. It is not to be sold for commercial gain; it is ours forever, as a group. We are being absorbed into an urban environment, but we remain the traditional ancestral property owners, and we will not allow our identity to be intruded upon or dissipated. It is a perspective that these two villages-in-the-city share today with Chen Village. This notion is influenced by and deliberately plays upon the strength of lineage traditions in South China.

Liede consists of four lineages bearing four surnames. In the newly developed Liede, space was set aside for four large new lineage halls, clustered together as though in fraternal equality and solidarity. They are replicas of Qing dynasty-style architecture, built of traditional brickwork and hand-crafted ornamentation. Daytimes, elderly Liede villagers today congregate in the halls to play mahjong in what is demonstrably their ancestral territory. Nearby sits the village temple, housing the old tudi gong (village god). These low-lying buildings stand in spacious open ground. This is extremely valuable land, devoted to totally non-commercial purposes. They were all built with shareholding company money, to honour village tradition and as a public assertion that Liede is sacred ancestral land. This is not what an ordinary profit-seeking company would do. Rather, it is in keeping with the convictions and priorities of a village leadership – and a means to seek constituency support.

The Xinxiang shareholding company will act similarly. Xinxiang has four lineage groups and traditionally contained five lineage halls (the Lis had two). As part of redevelopment, the company is paying the developer to construct five expensive new lineage halls. The village temple has been declared a heritage site and will remain untouched. Redevelopment plans carefully build around it. Notably, the Chen Village authorities similarly have lavished attention and money on two lineage halls, and in Longtou, the hamlet lineage halls have also been preserved in the plans of the hamlet shareholding companies. Strategically and symbolically, lineage, village, land, and company have all become intertwined.

The effects of the Guangdong Model of urbanisation

The Guangdong model shapes a distinct type of urban development. It has had a major impact on urban planning in Guangzhou and Shenzhen and in the creation of industrial zones in the Pearl River delta and beyond. It is a type of development that depends upon retention of collective ownership of the land; upon a conversion of Mao-era socialist units into shareholding property companies; upon a local authority structure grounded in formerly rural village administrations; and upon a negotiated relationship between higher level authorities and the local native communities/companies. Other parts of China contain numerous examples of what we call the Guangdong Model – colleagues have found it at field sites in Wuhan, Hangzhou, Shenyang in the Northeast, and semi-rural districts of Zhejiang. But in many other parts of China, urban development and industrial zones are normally shaped entirely by urban bureaus and political authorities, sometimes in league with property developers. Local villagers are often forced off their land and out of their homes and relocated elsewhere. The monetary compensation often is not sufficient for them to get a head-start in developing...
an urban livelihood, and their disadvantage is compounded due to inadequate education and a lack of appropriate skills. Across China, a huge population of recent rural residents whose villages have been lost to industrialisation or urbanisation exists today at the margins of urban life, a disadvantaged underclass in the making.

The Guangdong Model entails a very different form of development. Rural residents, rather than being dispersed from their villages and homes, remain anchored in their own communities. The Guangdong Model also distributes wealth and opportunity very differently. In doing so, it is creating a new privileged class comprising millions of people who have an enviable transition to urban life. They move directly from farming toward economic middle-class status, based upon the good fortune of where their farmland is located.

Moreover, since much of their income derives from collectively held land, the new-found wealth is spread relatively evenly among all of the former village populace. This contrasts sharply with the effects of property development not just elsewhere in China, but also elsewhere in the world. Normally, a small group of capitalist families or large property corporations are the principal beneficiaries in the development of industrial parks or of enormous projects such as those at Xinxiang and Liede. Instead, in the Guangdong Model all of the members of fortunately located rural collectives – 1,000 native residents in Chen Village, 3,000 in Longtou, 4,000 in Xinxiang, and 7,000 in Liede – reap a share in the ongoing profits of property development.

They are in an anomalous situation within their new urbanised environment. They have the financial means to begin to live a middle-class lifestyle, but they do not have the social manners, taste, accent, or educated knowledge to enjoy a genuinely respectable status among the urban middle class. This undoubtedly is one reason why they wish to cling together on their native properties and why they emphasise their own perception of high group status as the traditional owners of the land – graphically highlighted by the reconstruction of lineage halls.

Inasmuch as most of these formerly rural people have few skills that can be used in an urban environment, they have largely become a new leisured class. The jobs in the labour market that they are capable of handling can equally be occupied by low-paid migrant workers, so it is not worth their while to seek employment to supplement their dividends and rental incomes. Nor would a blue-collar job help them attain a respectable image in keeping with their middle-class living standard. To resolve this dilemma, their former rural collectives provide white-collar employment that is preserved exclusively for them. At Chen Village, this takes the shape of Chinese-side Factory Head job titles. At Longtou, white-collar jobs supervising neighbourhood services are reserved for hamlet members. At Liede, more than 200 jobs in the housing estate’s property office are held by local Liede residents, and additional jobs will be set aside for them when the office and shopping precinct now under construction opens for business. An executive in the property-development department of the Xinxian shareholding company said in a 2012 interview that Xinxian similarly plans to reserve a considerable amount of employment of this kind for Xinxian natives.

But the real potential to make a successful transition into respected urban middle-class status rests with their children. Notably, in all four of the communities the leaderships and shareholding companies spend money to assure better schools for the local villagers’ children than can be accessed by ordinary urban students. Good teachers are lured to the schools by salary supplements; school facilities are improved beyond what the government education bureau provides; scholarships are offered to native students who go on to higher education. The money is intended to give the next generation the educational skills to succeed in the new environment. In short, while it is not easy for this formerly rural populace to move from a life of dependence on dividends and rents to gainful urban careers, the ground is being laid for the future.

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The Extent of In Situ Urbanisation in China’s County Areas: 

The case of Fujian Province

YU ZHU, MIN LIN, LIYUE LIN, AND JINMEI CHEN

ABSTRACT: By developing and using indexes reflecting “quasi-urban” status, this paper attempts to quantitatively estimate the “invisible” contribution of in situ urbanisation to the overall urbanisation process in the county areas of Fujian Province. The results show that the urbanisation level of the county areas in Fujian Province would be significantly increased if the urban characteristics resulting from in situ urbanisation were fully reflected, suggesting that the conventional urban statistics seriously underestimate the true extent of rural-urban transformation in the county areas. Furthermore, such underestimation is more serious in the coastal areas with most dynamic socioeconomic development, and thus distorts the true picture of the spatial pattern of rural-urban transformation. The paper explores the implications of the above results for the understanding of China’s urbanisation process, suggesting that rural-urban transformation and the corresponding planning practice in China should be conceptualised in the context of blurred rural-urban distinction and more important roles for rural areas in the urbanisation process.

KEYWORDS: in situ urbanisation, quasi-urbanisation, urbanisation level, county areas, Fujian Province.

The emergence and development of in situ urbanisation has been one of the major characteristics of China’s urbanisation process since the 1980s. As opposed to the conventional city-based urbanisation dominated by rural-urban migration, in situ urbanisation is a phenomenon where rural settlements and their populations transform themselves into urban or quasi-urban settlements without much geographical relocation of the residents. It started as early as in the 1970s in the form of commune and brigade enterprises, and has brought tremendous structural and physical changes to vast rural areas in the following decades, leading to increasingly blurred distinctions between urban and rural settlements in China, especially in the densely populated coastal areas. It has also greatly promoted the development of some 20,000 small towns in China, containing more than 100 million people engaged in rural non-agricultural activities and their family members. Such a pattern of urbanisation has been widely identified in China, especially in the coastal area of Fujian Province, the Pearl River Delta region, and the Yangtze River Delta region, although alternative terms to “in situ urbanisation,” such as “rural urbanisation” and “urbanisation from below,” have also been used to conceptualise it from different perspectives. Clearly, a complete understanding of China’s urbanisation process will not be achieved if in situ urbanisation is not incorporated into the overall picture.

However, the widespread phenomenon of in situ urbanisation in China’s overall urbanisation has not been well recognised, and this has much to do with the inadequacy of the dichotomous approach, which is still dominant in conceptualising urbanisation and in compiling urban statistics both in China and internationally. Under such an approach, settlements and their populations are classified into two categories, namely either urban or rural, and it is assumed that the distinction between the two categories is clear-cut. Only those settlements and their populations strictly meeting the official urban criteria can be recognised as urban and thus included in official urban statistics; however, differences and changes within each of the two categories, including those resulting from in situ transformation of rural settlements and their populations, will not be reflected in the official statistics. Such an approach is still used by the National Bureau of Statistics of China in its recent stipulations concerning urban and rural definitions in statistics. According to the stipulations, China’s territory is divided into urban and rural areas, and it is assumed that the distinction between the two categories is clear-cut. Only those settlements and their populations strictly meeting the official urban criteria can be recognised as urban and thus included in official urban statistics; however, differences and changes within each of the two categories, including those resulting from in situ transformation of rural settlements and their populations, will not be reflected in the official statistics. Such an approach is still used by the National Bureau of Statistics of China in its recent stipulations concerning urban and rural definitions in statistics.

2. See Xiaotong Fei, “Xiao chengzhen, da wenti” (Small towns, big issues), Liaowang (Outlook), No. 3, 1984, pp. 11-13.
and rural areas. The urban areas refer to the neighbourhood committees and other areas within or connected to the built-up areas of the seats of city district governments (in the case of cities divided into sub-districts), the city governments (in the case of cities not divided into sub-district), the county governments, and the town governments; and the isolated special areas of industrial and mining districts, development zones, research institutions, higher education institutions, and the seats of farms and tree farms, which are not within or connected to the built-up areas of any government seats but each of which has a permanent population of more than 3,000. All other areas are referred to as rural areas. Statistics produced according to the above stipulations cannot fully reflect the enormous changes of China’s rural areas in terms of population densities, employment structure, and physical environment caused by in situ urbanisation, leading to a serious under-estimation of the true extent of rural-urban transformation in China.

Examined in an international context, in situ urbanisation is not a phenomenon unique to China. As early as in the late 1980s, Terry McGee and his colleagues identified the in situ transformation of quasi-urban settlements and the increasingly important role of local non-agricultural activities in rural-urban transformation in what they termed desakota regions in the areas adjacent to some Asian mega-cities. Based on this kind of phenomenon, McGee and Ginsburg further proposed the concept of “settlement transition,” which involves “the urbanisation of the countryside without massive rural–urban migration.”

Early this century, Mohammad A. Qadeer has also identified a “largely unacknowledged” form of urbanisation in vast rural areas of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, where the in-place growth of population results in densities that equal or exceed the urban threshold of 400 persons per km², comparable to the population densities in exurbs of Western cities such as Los Angeles, New York, or Toronto. Calling such rural regions “ruralopolises,” Qadeer points out that the unprecedented high population density is “the transforming force that invests rural regions with urban spatial characteristics,” leading to the emergence of “a hybrid settlement system that is spatially urban.”

Given the widespread existence of in situ urbanisation not only in China but also in other parts of the world, developing a method to quantitatively reveal its position in the overall urbanisation process is of great significance.

County areas, (11) which are mostly “rural” under China’s dichotomous administrative system, are the focus of this study. Based on the case of Fujian Province (Map 1), which is among the most developed regions in terms of in situ urbanisation in China as mentioned earlier, this paper attempts to create and use indexes of “quasi-urban ratio” and “quasi-urban population” to quantify in situ urbanisation and to reveal its “invisible” contribution to the overall urbanisation process. It is hoped that such an exercise will contribute to the effort of incorporating in situ urbanisation into the analysis of the overall urbanisation process, thus achieving a more complete understanding of China’s urbanisation process in the reform era.

The accumulation of urban elements in in situ urbanisation: Processes and major dimensions

As Champion and Hugo point out, “The fundamental distinction between urban and rural places is normally in terms of continuously built-up area, population density, and the economic and political functions carried out in those areas.” (12) One of the most important aspects of in situ urbanisation in Fujian Province has been the development of non-agricultural activities in rural areas in the form of township and village enterprises (TVEs). (13) This has brought the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy, which are considered to be among the most important urban functions, down to the lowest levels of the settlement hierarchy, causing fundamental changes in the employment structure in the rural settlements, and even changes in administrative jurisdiction as a result of the emergence of an increasing number of newly designated cities and towns. (14) An important result of the above transformation is the increasing share of rural residents engaged in non-agricultural activities, which constitutes an important basis for the formation of quasi-urban populations.

This in situ urbanisation can be strongly linked to high population density and the development of continuously built-up areas. Population density had already existed in the coastal areas of Fujian Province well before the above mentioned economic and employment transformation. (15) Villages with a population of 2,000 persons were common, and the even bigger (piancun), i.e., incorporated villages formed through the expansion and interconnection of these villages, had been observed before the 1980s. (16) As a result, the population density of the 27 coastal county areas in the 2000 census was as high as 663 persons per square kilometre, much higher than 400 persons per square kilometre, which is considered as an almost universal criterion for defining urban settlement in the world. (17) Therefore, although many settlements in these areas are still regarded as rural, they have already attained urban population size and density. (18)

Starting in the latter half of the 1990s, the rural non-agricultural enterprises in Fujian’s county areas, most of which were TVEs (rural township and village enterprises), adopted more concentrated development patterns. (19) They moved to investment zones, industrial zones, and development zones, some of which are part of the built-up areas of designated towns due to their expansion. The development of rural non-agricultural activities also created the demand and provided capital for the development of public facilities, infrastructure, and service sectors, and changed the way of life of local rural residents. (20)

Despite the significant accumulation of urban elements in the county areas of Fujian Province mentioned above, they are not well captured by the official urban statistics. This is partly reflected in Table 1, showing the ratio of the share of non-agricultural employment to the share of urban population (N/U) for Fujian Province. The higher the N/U value is, the

### Table 1 – The non-agricultural employment/urbanisation (N/U) ratio of Fujian Province

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share of non-agricultural employment (%) (N)</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>68.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of urban population (%) (U)</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>49.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/U</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
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</table>


11. Following common practice in China, “county areas” (xian) refer to areas of counties (xian) and so-called county-level cities (xianshi), both of which are county-level administrative units under China’s administrative system. A county can be designated as a county-level municipality when it meets certain economic, financial, and population criteria; however, a county-level municipality is still similar to a county in rural-urban classification in the sense that village committees are still the dominant lowest-level administrative units in their areas. This is in contrast to the non-county areas at the same administrative level, namely districts of prefecture-level municipalities, where the proportion of urban administrative units, namely residents’ committees, are much higher, and often dominant, as the lowest-level administrative units in their areas. For more details on China’s urban and rural administrative system and the criteria for the designation of county-level municipalities, see Yu Zhu, “Changing Urbanisation Processes and In Situ Rural-Urban Transformation: Reflections on China’s Settlement Definitions,” op. cit.


stronger the contrast between the high proportion of non-agricultural employment and the low level of urbanisation, and thus the less sufficient official urban statistics are in reflecting the extent of rural-urban transformation. As can be seen in Table 1, such a contrast is evident in Fujian. Furthermore, as Table 1 demonstrates, a widening gap between the proportion of non-agricultural employment and the proportion of urban population can be observed.

A large proportion of the rural population in these areas is also involved in the other two dimensions of rural-urban transformation. A method needs to be developed to quantitatively capture such quasi-urban characteristics, measure the gap between them and the fully developed urban characteristics, and then calculate the size of the population with such quasi-urban characteristics.

Quantiﬁcation the invisible roles of in situ urbanisation

We can estimate the size of the quasi-urban population in a county area based on the size of its rural population engaged in non-agricultural activities. Such estimation involves two main steps. First, as the rural population is not fully urban according to official urban criteria, its size needs to be adjusted (reduced) by being multiplied by a quasi-urban ratio reflecting its degree of urbanity, or the degree of accumulation of urban characteristics; second, we assume that the dependents of the rural population engaged in non-agricultural activities possess the same urban characteristics, and should be included in the estimation of the size of the quasi-urban population. After the above two-step procedure, we can derive the size of the quasi-urban population and its proportion of the total population, and then add it to the urban population officially recognised in statistics, incorporating the results of in situ urbanisation. The above procedure is reflected in the following formula:

\[
IU = \frac{UP + \sum_{i=1}^{n} A_i E_i \times (1 + C)}{P}
\]

- IU is the revised urban proportion of the population of a county area,
- UP (A) is the number of urban residents officially recognised in urban statistics,
- N is the number of rural residents engaged in non-agricultural activities,
- \(E_i\) is the quasi-urban ratio of the number i urban characteristic used to adjust the number of rural residents engaged in non-agricultural activities to derive the size of the quasi-urban population, \(A_i\) is the weight of \(E_i\),
- C is the dependent ratio of the quasi-urban population,
- P is the total number of a county area’s residents, and
- \(A_i E_i\) is the overall quasi-urban ratio for the rural residents engaged in non-agricultural activities.

The calculation of \(E_i, A_i,\) and C are elaborated in the Appendix, and data for 2007 are used in the calculation.

Based on formula 1, Table 2 presents the proportion of the officially recognised urban population (B), which is defined according to the stipulations of China’s National Bureau of Statistics concerning urban and rural delineation mentioned earlier, and obtained directly from Fujian Statistical Yearbook (2008); the proportion of the quasi-urban population, derived from formula 1; and the revised proportion of urban population, namely the value of IU from formula 1, which incorporates both the proportion of the officially recognised urban population and the proportion of the quasi-urban population, for each county area of Fujian Province and the total area of all its counties (C).

Relative roles of in situ urbanisation and officially recognised urbanisation in Fujian’s county areas

The most important finding from the above estimation is that the conventional urban statistics seriously under-estimate the true extent of rural-urban transformation. From the 2008 Fujian Statistical Yearbook one can see that the officially recognised urban population of Fujian’s 58 county areas was 9,101,100 in 2007, accounting for 36.5% of the total population. This suggests a predominantly rural picture with a low urbanisation rate. However, if in situ urbanisation is incorporated into the overall picture, the situation is quite different. The results of the above estimation suggest that the quasi-urban population of Fujian’s county areas amounted to 6,208,000 in 2007, accounting for 24.9% of the total population. If this quasi-urban population is included, then we can derive a revised total urban population of 15,309,100, and a revised urbanisation rate of 61.4% for the county areas of Fujian Province. This figure is certainly more consistent with the reality observed on the ground – that rural industrialisation is widespread and well developed – and therefore more accurately reflects the true extent to which the settlements and their populations in Fujian’s county areas have been transformed into urban or quasi-urban locales. In fact, comparing the revised urbanisation rate and the officially recognised urbanisation rates, one can infer that 40.55% of the rural-urban transformation process in Fujian’s county areas is “hidden” behind the official urban statistics.

Examining different combinations of the proportions of the officially recognised urban population and the quasi-urban population in county areas, one can obtain more detailed insights into the relative roles of both in situ urbanisation and officially recognised urbanisation in the overall urbanisation process in Fujian’s county areas. Such combinations can be divided into four types (Map 2). The first type relates to county areas where the proportions of both the officially recognised urban population and of the quasi-urban population were higher than the corresponding provincial averages for county areas. They are all located in Fujian’s south-eastern coastal area, with Jinjiang near Quanzhou City as a typical example. This area is well known for the development of in situ urbanisation driven by the development of industrial township and village enterprises, which started in the early 1980s. In the long process of in situ development, two dimensions of official urban criteria, namely non-agricultural employment and high population densities, had long been met in many of these rural settlements. In recent development, the expansion of public facilities and infrastructure from the built-up...
Table 2 – Proportions of officially recognised urban population and quasi-urban population in Fujian’s county areas, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County Area</th>
<th>Proportion of the officially recognised urban population (A)</th>
<th>Proportion of the quasi-urban population (B)</th>
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<td>27.71%</td>
<td>26.06%</td>
<td>53.78%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lianjiang County</td>
<td>33.58%</td>
<td>28.72%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>50.03%</td>
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<td>16.90%</td>
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<td>42.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>22.98%</td>
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<td>Jinjiang Municipality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nan'an Municipality</td>
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<td>Zhenghe County</td>
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<td>Xiapu County</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuding Municipalita</td>
<td>47.20%</td>
<td>14.26%</td>
<td>61.46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 36.51% 24.90% 61.41%

areas of existing towns and cities to their neighbouring villages has also fulfilled the urban criterion of continuously built-up areas. Thus after a long process of development, many originally rural settlements and their populations in these county areas have completed their rural-urban transformation in all three dimensions of rural-urban transformation mentioned earlier, leading to an increase in the proportion of the officially recognised urban population. At the same time, in situ urbanisation in other rural parts of these county areas is developing dynamically, leading to a continued increase in the proportion of the quasi-urban population.

The second type of combination is related to county areas where the proportion of the officially recognised urban population was lower than the corresponding provincial average of the county areas, but the proportion of the quasi-urban population was higher than the corresponding provincial average of the county areas. They are located in or near the coastal area, close to its major cities. County areas surrounding Fuzhou, the provincial capital of Fujian Province, such as Fuqing Municipality and Changle Municipality, are typical examples. In these county areas, the early stage of rural development since the reform era was characterised by emigration (in the case of Fuqing Municipality and Changle Municipality) to other countries, including Japan, Europe, and the US, and by out-migration to other parts of China. Therefore in situ urbanisation started later and has been less developed compared to the county areas of the first type, and fewer rural settlements and populations have experienced a transformation mature enough for official recognition in urban statistics. However, since the late 1990s and early 2000s, in situ urbanisation has started to catch up in these areas, leading to a significant increase in the proportion of the quasi-urban population. It can be expected that changes similar to those of the first type will appear in these areas in the future.

The third type of combination is related to county areas where the proportion of the officially recognised urban population was higher than the corresponding provincial average of county areas, but the proportion of the quasi-urban population was lower than the provincial average for county areas. Shaowu and Wuyishan are two examples of this type. Most of these areas are located in the inland or mountainous parts of Fujian, where in situ urbanisation has not been well developed. In contrast, in these areas the designated towns, especially the towns where the seats of the county or county-level municipal governments are located, play a big role in the urbanisation process, due to their proximity to major transport systems, especially railways. Business and employment there have attracted a large number of rural residents to move to them, leading to an increase of the proportion of the officially recognised urban population.

The fourth type of combination relates to county areas where the proportion of both the officially recognised urban population and of the quasi-urban population were lower than the provincial averages for county areas. Ninghua County and Datian County are two examples of

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24. Shishi Municipality is an exception, as it is located in the coastal area with well-developed in situ urbanisation. It used to be part of Jinjiang Municipality, and was designated as a municipality with a small area of rural hinterland as early as the 1980s, and therefore most of its population can be easily included in the officially recognised urban statistics.
this type. Such counties are mostly located in inland and mountainous areas of Fujian and have relatively less developed economies, and therefore both in situ urbanisation and officially recognised urbanisation lag behind other areas in Fujian.

Two further observations can be made in relation to the above schema. First, officially recognised urbanisation and in situ urbanisation have been driven by different forces. In the areas where officially recognised urbanisation is more dominant, the state plays a more important role in the urbanisation process; in the areas where quasi-urbanisation is more dominant, forces such as the development of rural township and village enterprises (TVEs) are more important.

Second, quasi-urbanisation and officially recognised urbanisation are interrelated. In fact, quasi-urbanisation can be regarded as the first, immature stage of in situ urbanisation. After a certain period of development, the expansion and development of infrastructure and public facilities will eventually lead to a situation where all three dimensions of rural-urban transformation in the areas concerned meet the official urban criteria, and thus quasi-urbanisation becomes officially recognised urbanisation.

Different spatial patterns of in situ urbanisation and officially recognised urbanisation

While in situ urbanisation is not negligible in Fujian’s county areas as a whole, it plays a particularly important role in some parts of Fujian Province, especially its coastal area. At the same time, when examining the distribution of the proportion of the officially recognised urban population in Fujian’s county areas (Map 3), one finds that although it varies significantly among the county areas, no clear spatial pattern can be identified between coastal and inland regions. It can be calculated that the proportions of the officially recognised urban population for the former and latter were 36.5% and 36.52% respectively in 2007.

However, the distribution of the quasi-urban population in Fujian’s county areas exhibits a very different spatial pattern. As can be seen in Map 4, county areas with a high proportion of quasi-urban population are mostly located in the coastal area, except for its northern part, which is mountainous. The proportions of the quasi-urban population in 2007 were mostly above 25% in these coastal county areas, below 15% in the inland area, and from 15 to 25% in the south-western part of the province. On the whole, a clear contrast between the coastal and inland areas can be identified. It can be calculated that in the coastal areas as a whole the proportion of the quasi-urban population was 32%, while that of the inland area was only 13%.

Map 5 demonstrates the revised proportion of urban population in Fujian’s county areas by combining the officially recognised urban population and the quasi-urban population. The revised proportion of urban population in the coastal areas was 68.54% in 2007, much higher than the 49.69% for inland areas. Since there was no significant difference between the coastal and inland areas in terms of the proportion of the officially recognised urban population, the above difference was largely caused by the difference in the proportion of the quasi-urban population.
in the coastal and inland areas. This result confirms again the important role of in situ urbanisation in the overall rural-urban transformation process and its spatial pattern. It also resolves an issue that has puzzled relevant government departments in Fujian Province for a long time, namely why the proportion of the officially recognised urban population in the coastal area of Fujian, which is economically more developed, has not been higher than in the inland part of the province. The answer is that the official urban statistics underestimate the extent of rural-urban transformation in Fujian’s county areas, and thus distort the true picture of the spatial pattern of rural-urban transformation. Such a distortion has important implications for urban and regional planning in Fujian Province, and deserves close attention.

**Implications of in situ rural-urban transformation for urban statistics and urban planning practices**

The important status of in situ urbanisation poses great challenges not only to conventional urban statistics, but also to conventional urban planning practices. Since a similar phenomenon is widespread in China, as mentioned earlier, such challenges are by no means restricted to Fujian Province. In fact, while the growth of some major mega-cities in China such as Shanghai and Guangzhou has increasingly become the focus of urban development in China, one of its most important components and most difficult issues to deal with is in situ urbanisation of the populations of the surrounding quasi-urban areas of these cities. (27) Since in situ urbanisation and the quasi-urban population occupy such an important position in the overall rural-urban transformation process, a more sophisticated, non-dichotomous system of settlement categories covering the whole continuum of rural-urban changes, and a new planning framework going beyond the city-centred approach and reflecting the reality of a blurred rural-urban distinction, are urgently needed.

A multidimensional scoring system can be developed to measure the degree of urbanity of all settlements, determine the settlement types, and monitor their transformation. Details of the scoring systems still need to be explored; however, the three major dimensions of in situ rural-urban transformation mentioned earlier provide guidelines for selecting the indicators and determining the criteria for different settlement categories. A settlement can be assigned a score, which can be compared to a threshold value to decide whether the locale is urban or rural. While locales identified as urban can be included in the official system of urban statistics, those settlements with scores below the threshold value can be categorised as either rural or a transitional settlement type, according to their scores. In this way, all settlements with different degrees of urbanity (or rurality) can be covered by this settlement category system and monitored by the official statistics. This will effectively enable the relevant research and planning practices to be expanded to the rural end of the settlement system.

In terms of a new planning framework going beyond the city-centred approach and reflecting the reality of blurred rural-urban distinctions, an important and encouraging step has been taken in China in this regard. In October 2007, the Urban-Rural Planning Law of the People’s Republic of China was promulgated. This will promote the adoption of an integrated approach in the planning of rural and urban areas, including those with well-developed in situ urbanisation. However, a careful reading of the law reveals that although it now extends its coverage to rural areas on the surface, it remains vague and inadequate in addressing planning issues caused by the blurred rural-urban distinction and the resultant increasing importance of rural localities and intensified rural-urban interaction. Many technical details still need to be worked out for the implementation of the law before in situ urbanisation can be adequately included.

This is reflected in the fact that in terms of the planning framework, there are essentially still two types of planning under the current law: namely urban planning, consisting of urban system planning, city planning, and town planning; and rural planning consisting of rural township planning and village planning. In fact, in the deliberations of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress before the law was promulgated, some members of the standing committee pointed out that the law should not be “a simple combination of the original Urban Planning Law and the Regulations Regarding the Construction of Villages and Market Towns,” and criticised the fact that the law’s content on township and village planning was significantly weaker than that on city and town planning. (28) Furthermore, the real planning practices are still overwhelmingly dominated by the needs of built-up areas; quasi-urban areas or more conventional rural areas and their populations are still neglected, treated merely as a background for the planning of the built-up areas, with much less consideration of their needs in infrastructure, public utilities, land uses, and their spatial relationship with the urban cores. (29) This is not commensurate with the fact that in situ urbanisation has created great demand for urban-like planning. Therefore, the Urban-Rural Planning Law needs to be revised to elaborate the relationships among urban system planning, city planning, town planning, township planning, and village planning, and to adopt the “city region,” which covers not only the major city but also smaller cities, towns, and semi-urban and rural hinterland, which are beyond the administrative boundary of the major city but under its influence, (30) as a planning unit, so that both the city core and its surrounding rural and quasi-rural areas under its influence can be truly included in the planning practices to accommodate the reality of the blurred rural-urban distinction. It is hoped that the important position of in situ urbanisation will serve as a catalyst to push forward the efforts of addressing the inadequacies in conventional urban statistics and urban planning practices, so that the quasi-urban areas and populace resulting from in situ urbanisation of the county areas can be truly incorporated into China’s overall urban and regional planning.

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29. Yu Zhu, Xinhua Qi, Guodong Wang, Uyue Lin, and Min Lin, Zhongguo de jiudi chengzhenhua: Lilun yu shizheng (China’s In Situ Urbanisation: Theories and empirical evidence), op. cit.

Appendix: The calculation of $E_i, A_i$ and $C$ in formula (1)

\[
\frac{UP + N \sum_{i=1}^{n} A_i E_i \times (1 + C)}{P} \quad (i = 1, 2, ..., n)
\]

The calculation of $E_i$

In the formula below, if $X_i^0 (i=1,2,...,n)$ is the criterion for the number $i$ indicator to be fully urban, $X_i (i=1,2,...,n)$ is the value of that indicator for a county area, then $E_i (i=1,2,...,n)$ is the ratio of $X_i$ over $X_i^0$. It is the quasi-urban ratio for the number $i$ indicator reflecting the number $i$ urban characteristic for the county area.

\[
E_i = \begin{cases} 
\frac{X_i}{X_i^0}, & X_i/X_i^0 \leq 1 \\
1, & X_i/X_i^0 > 1
\end{cases}
\]

Here $0 \leq E_i \leq 1; \quad i = 1, 2, ..., n$.

There are many indicators that can reflect the urban characteristics of a county area. In this paper, we adopt the three fundamental dimensions mentioned earlier that distinguish between urban and rural places, namely continuously built-up areas, population density, and the economic and political functions carried out in those areas. We first choose the number of rural residents engaged in non-agricultural activities, which appears as $N$ in formula (1), as the first indicator to reflect the urban economic functions in a county area. As this indicator is used as the base number for estimating the size of the quasi-urban population in a county area, we no longer consider it in the calculation of the $E_i$ value. We then choose population density, which is the second fundamental dimension distinguishing urban and rural places, as a major indicator reflecting urban characteristics, and calculate its $E_i$ value accordingly.

Unfortunately, no direct indicators reflecting the third fundamental dimension of rural-urban distinction, namely continuously built-up areas, can be obtained for the county areas, and therefore we have to use indirect indicators as surrogates. Taking Sijun Wang’s similar work as the reference and considering the availability, quantifiability, and comparability of various indicators, we choose five such surrogate indicators of a built-up area, namely the proportion of villages in a county area with access to tap water, telephones, automobiles, and cable TV, and the reversed Engle coefficient of the rural areas of a county area.

$X_2$: the proportion of villages with access to tap water in a county area;

$X_3$: the proportion of villages with access to telephones in a county area;

$X_4$: the proportion of villages with access to automobiles in a county area;

$X_5$: the proportion of villages with access to cable TV in a county area;

$X_6$: the reversed Engle coefficient, namely 1 minus the Engle coefficient of the rural areas of a county area.

In calculating the $E_i$ value, $X_i^0$ also needs to be determined. As 400 persons per square kilometre is considered an almost universal criterion worldwide for defining urban settlement, we choose this value as $X_i^0$. We choose the corresponding average values of Fujian’s urban areas for $X_2$ to $X_6$, as the values for $X_2^0$ to $X_6^0$, where $X_2^0, X_3^0, X_4^0, X_5^0$ are all equal to 100, and $X_6^0$ is 61.1% according the figure of 2007 in *Fujian Statistical Yearbook*. On the basis of the above values, the $E_i$ values can be calculated.

The calculation of $A_i$

As can be seen in Formula (1), due to the different importance of various indicators in determining the overall quasi-urban ratio for the rural population in a county area engaged in non-agricultural activities, we need to apply a weight ($A_i$) to each of the $E_i$ values to calculate the multiplication product of $A_i E_i$. We use the method of entropy value (35) to determine the weights. In such a method, a smaller entropy value of an indicator suggests a larger variation of the indicator’s values and more useful information provided by the indicator, and therefore this indicator should be assigned a higher weight. On the other hand, a larger entropy value suggests a smaller variation of the indicator’s values and less useful information provided by the indicator, and therefore this indicator should be assigned a lower weight. Thus the method of entropy value can well reflect the relative importance of the indicators in determining the overall quasi-urban ratio, as well as avoid the shortcomings of the subjective weighing method, which heavily relies on the subjective judgments of people.

References:


33. The Engle coefficient is the proportion of family income that is spent on food consumption, and the reversed Engle coefficient is the proportion of family income that is spent on non-food consumption.


the experts involved to determining the weights of the indicators. The

(a) Standardisation of the data: \( X_{ij} = \frac{X_{ij} - \text{min}(X_{ij})}{(\text{max}(X_{ij}) - \text{min}(X_{ij}))} \) 

(b) Calculation of the proportion of number \( i \) value of the number \( j \) indicator:

\[
Y_{ij} = \frac{X_{ij}}{\sum_{i=1}^{m} X_{ij}} \quad i=1,2,...; j=1,2,...n
\]

(c) Calculation of the information entropies:

\[
e_j = -k \sum_{i=1}^{m} (Y_{ij} \times \ln Y_{ij})
\]

where \( k = 1/m \), \( 0 \leq e_j \leq 1, (i=1,2,...; j=1,2,...n) \);

(d) Calculation of the variation coefficients: \( g_j = 1 - e_j \) \( (j=1,2,...;n) \);

(e) Calculation of the weights: \( j=1,2,...;n \).

In the above formulas, \( \text{max}(X_{ij}) \) and \( \text{min}(X_{ij}) \) are the minimum and maximum values of an indicator, \( m \) is the number of values for each of the indicators, which in the case of this study is 58, the number of county areas of Fujian Province, and \( n \) is 6, the number of indicators.

Following the above procedure we calculated the values of \( A_i \) as shown in Table 3, together with the \( X^0_i \) values.

**The calculation of \( C \)**

The dependent ratio \( C \) in formula 1 was obtained by using the following formula:

\[
C(\%) = \frac{\text{Number of non-employed people in rural areas of a county area}}{\text{Number of employed people in the rural areas of a county area}}
\]

Applying the results of the above procedures to formula (1) and its components, we can obtain the size and proportion of the quasi-urban population and the revised proportion of the urban population (incorporating the quasi-urban population) for both Fujian’s county areas as a whole and for each of the county areas in Fujian, as shown in the main text and Table 2.

### Table 3 – Values of \( X^0_i \) and \( A_i \) for Fujian’s county areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( X_i )</th>
<th>( X^0 )</th>
<th>( A_i )</th>
<th>( X_i )</th>
<th>( X^0 )</th>
<th>( A_i )</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population density of rural areas (Persons/km²)</td>
<td>400</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>0.0393</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proportion of villages with access to tap water (%)</td>
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<td>0.0867</td>
<td>Proportion of villages with access to cable TV (%)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.0392</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proportion of villages with access to telephones (%)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.0377</td>
<td>The reversed Engle coefficient (%)</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>0.1459</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fujian Statistical Yearbook (2008); Data from the second agricultural census of Fujian Province.
Urban Planning Goes Rural: Conceptualising the “New Village”

David Bray

ABSTRACT: A major goal of the national program to Build a New Socialist Countryside is to modernise and urbanise the rural built environment. This objective has been bolstered by the extension of state-sponsored urban planning regimes into rural jurisdictions. One of the implications of this is that every administrative village in China is now required to commission and implement a 20-year “master plan” for redevelopment. Through tracing the origins and rationale of key policy initiatives, in the first part of this paper I aim to show how urban planning came to be seen as an appropriate tool for solving a range of intractable rural “problems.” In the second part of the paper, I present a case study of village redevelopment in order to illustrate how the principles of urban planning have been applied to the re-making of rural built environments and the transformation of rural life.

KEYWORDS: rural urbanisation, urban planning, built environment, rural social change.

Introduction: How to re-design a village

Liuxian Village is fairly typical of villages on the plains of northern China, a cluster of single-storey brick homes enclosed by walled courtyards and surrounded by an expanse of flat, dry farmland. Recently, however, efforts have been made to improve the built environment: roads have been sealed, the walls that line the main street have been uniformly painted in pale yellow with dark red trim, neat rows of young trees have been planted along the roadside, and a new “cultural square” has been created in the centre of the village complete with stage, brightly coloured exercise equipment, and an engraved marble monument that tells the history of the village on one side and on the other side lists the donors who financed construction of the square. It turns out that Liuxian Village has done quite well economically: two local factories (formerly village-owned enterprises) – one that produces rotary saw blades and another that manufactures fireworks – have become large and successful private enterprises enjoyed by this village are its close proximity to a busy and rapidly growing employment opportunities for its residents – and the fact that village land has been well economically: two local factories (formerly village-owned enterprises) – one that produces rotary saw blades and another that manufactures fireworks – have become large and successful private enterprises enjoying the village are its close proximity to a busy and rapidly growing employment opportunities for its residents – and the fact that village land borders the Beijing-Shenyang Freeway, thus offering good transport links to major cities.

But Liuxian Village also has lots of shortcomings – at least this is the verdict of the urban planners who were hired to draft a new plan for village redevelopment through to 2020. According to their analysis, the main problems are:

1. The village residential area is too big, resulting in a serious waste of land;
2. The dispersed village layout is not conducive to the installation of public infrastructure and facilities;
3. The functional zoning of village land is chaotic: aquaculture, industry, housing, and public facilities are all mixed together;
4. The current land-use arrangements are not conducive to the future development of any productive sectors;
5. The village has too many dead-end roads, and transport flow has been neglected;
6. There is no effective landscaping in most parts of the village.

The key to solving problems 1-4 is to implement a radical program of land-use zoning, as the planners explain: “Through rearranging the current industry and land resources, we will create four concentrated functional zones: an aquaculture and fishing zone in the north; a processing and manufacturing zone in the centre; a green agricultural zone in the south; and a residential and public service zone in the east.” The eastern zone, namely the new Liuxian Village, retains some parts of the old village (renovated and modernised) but also requires the demolition of a large section of the village to make way for a new high-rise housing estate and to return land to other productive purposes. According to the plan, where the old sprawling horizontal village occupies around 30% of total village-controlled land, the new, partially vertical village footprint will occupy only 10%, reducing the built-up area of the village to one-third of its original size. The overall amount of agricultural land will remain about the same as now, so the land reclaimed through shrinking the village will mostly be used to expand non-agricultural industries, with the principal objective of providing more local employment opportunities for villagers as well as developing the local economy.

Problems 5 and 6 simply require some additional investment in roads and landscaping. While better roads might promote economic development, the imperative for landscaping seems a good deal less apparent. But the significance of landscaping is revealed when we consider the underlying logic of village redevelopment. The planners of Liuxian Village claim that their

1. This description is based on my visit to the village in November 2009. All the data and master plan materials discussed below were collected then.
3. Ibid.
broader objective is to promote “urban and rural integration” (cheng-xiang yitihu 城乡一体化) and “the transformation of farmers into urbanites” (nongmin shiminhua 农民市民化), and that this will be achieved through “building a new countryside that is comfortable, harmonious, and civilised.” This redevelopment project, therefore, is not just about enhancing the economic efficiency and productivity of the village and lifting the incomes of its residents. It is designed to be a coordinated and comprehensive program for urbanising the village and transforming its residents. Landscaping signifies the intervention of culture into the hitherto “natural” and prosaic rural environment. Landscaping a settlement clearly demarcates the boundary between social and cultural life on the one hand and agricultural and industrial production on the other hand. Just as China’s cities have been spatially restructured and landscaped in recent years to separate working space from social and cultural space (witness the demise of the danwei and the rise of the landscaped housing estate or xiaoqu), so rural China is beginning to realise the same logic of “civilisation” through functional zoning and soft landscaping.

At first glance the plan for Liuxian Village may seem unrealistic and extravagant – even utopian. However, a quick survey of rural China will demonstrate that this is not merely an isolated project dreamed up by ambitious local officials. Rather it is one of many thousands of such projects that have emerged throughout rural China in recent years under the national program to Build a New Socialist Countryside (jianshe shehui zhuyi xin nongcun 建设社会主义新农村). The push to modernise and reconstruct rural China has been bolstered by the extension of urban planning into the countryside: in 2007 the Urban Planning Law (chengshi guihua fa 城市规划法), originally issued in 1990, was revised and reissued as the Urban and Rural Planning Law (chengxiang guihua fa 城乡规划法) in 2007. As a result, the principles and practices of urban planning began to be formally applied to rural as well as urban areas. The most far-reaching implication of this change is that every administrative village in China is now required to commission and implement a 20-year “master plan” for redevelopment.

The key features of the Liuxian Village plan – functional zoning, concentration of resources, landscaping, high-rise living – underscore the extent to which core principles of modernist urban planning are now being applied to these rural redevelopment projects. But this trend should not be read as a simple or straightforward transfer of planning techniques and practices from one realm to another. In fact, a range of initiatives in rural planning had been pioneered in various localities long before the new planning law was issued. It would be more accurate to say, therefore, that the concepts that underpin contemporary planning of village redevelopment have emerged through the marriage of two quite separate governmental discourses: a discourse of urban planning, with a genealogy that can be traced back through PRC history to the Soviet Union and to the origins of modernist planning in Europe and America; and a discourse focussed on problems of rural development in China, which can be traced back at least to the Republican era, and which has generated considerable debate in recent years under the rubric of “the three rural problems” (sannong wenti 三农问题).

In the first part of this paper, I show how these two discourses came together through key regional initiatives that sought to solve particular “rural

4. Ibid.
6. State Council, Zhonghua renmin gongheguo chengxiang guihua fa (People’s Republic of China Urban and Rural Planning Law), Beijing, 2007. The revised law was passed by the National People’s Congress in late 2007, but only came into effect from the beginning of 2008.
New foundations for rural planning: The “three concentrations”

Jiangsu Province has played a major role in pioneering rural development in recent years. Famous for its “Sunan (苏南) model” of collectively operated rural enterprises, Jiangsu was among the first provinces to develop strategies for coordinating industry and agriculture in rural areas. With expanding rural industry but limited rural land, and with concerns over food security at both provincial and national levels, it is easy to understand how the need for spatial planning of the countryside came to be seen as imperative. While the 1986 Land Management Law required all of China’s jurisdictions to increase oversight of land use, especially in relation to the preservation of “primary farmland” (jiben nongtian 基本农田), Jiangsu went further with the development of strategies designed to compensate for farmland lost to industry by creating additional farmland. This is to be implemented by reducing the spatial footprint of rural settlements. In provincial regulations issued in 1994, local rural authorities were enjoined to:

Rationally arrange the layout of housing, village enterprises, public infrastructure, and services; amalgamate dispersed natural villages and progressively build modern villages that are more concentrated and that possess a full complement of infrastructure; encourage rural industry to concentrate into industry parks and provide land for further development. (11)

By the mid-1990s, this strategy of “concentrating” rural settlements and industry had been incorporated into a provincial master plan with specific targets. It called for the province’s 289,000 “natural villages” (ziran cun 自然村) to be consolidated into 20,330 “central villages” (zhongyang cun 中心村) and 31,100 “basic villages” (jiben cun 基层村). If realised, this plan would reduce the amount of rural land used for residential purposes by about 50%, thereby releasing around three million mu (2,000 km²) of land for productive uses. But the plan was not just about saving farmland. It also introduced rural land zoning to create buffers between agriculture and industry, entailing a much higher degree of spatial planning. Henceforth, issues of 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, townships, and rural towns. (13)

Jiangsu Province’s neighbour, Shanghai Municipality, also pioneered new ways to coordinate planning across urban, semi-urban, and rural territories. While Shanghai is best known over the last two decades for the redevelopment and expansion of its core urban territory, including the spectacular emergence of Pudong skyscrapers, Shanghai authorities have also invested considerable efforts into the spatial restructuring of the municipality’s outer-lying rural hinterlands. (14) Even more than Jiangsu, Shanghai faced the problem of how to reconcile rapidly developing rural industry with the imperative to retain and protect primary farmland. In response to this conundrum, Shanghai authorities followed Jiangsu’s lead in promoting the consolidation of the rural population into larger, more compact settlements and through the concentration of rural factories in industrial zones. But they also went a step further than Jiangsu: encouraging farmers to amalgamate their farmland (through various cooperative or shareholding mechanisms) into larger farms in order to improve productivity. Around 1995, this suite of rural restructuring policies gained official designation as the “three concentrations” (sange jizhong 三个集中), (19)

In 2003, when the central government launched its new policy requiring “coordinated planning of urban and rural development,” (16) Shanghai responded by revamping its existing program for rural restructuring and integrated it with its larger municipal master plan. First it released a new guiding document whose stated goals were now far more ambitious: namely, to promote “urban and rural integration,” rural urbanisation, agricultural modernisation, and “the transformation of farmers into urbanites.” (17) To support these ambitious goals and to accelerate sub-urban integration, the document called for the rapid provision of essential infrastructure, facilities, and services, including roads, transport, water, natural gas, electricity, communications, sewerage, garbage collection, health care, education, culture, sports and entertainment, parks, shops, banks, and post offices. In short, the “three concentrations” were now conceived as a strategy to bring urban standards of living to the countryside. To achieve this, traditional villages would be demolished and replaced by larger scale, fully serviced, residential

15. Yishao Shi and Bixia Yang, “Shanghai jiaoqu shishi ‘sange jizhong’ zhanluede fansi ji duice jianyi” (Reflections on and countermeasures against implementing the strategy of “three concentrations” in suburban districts of Shanghai), Tongji daxue xuebao (shehui kexueban), Vol. 15, No. 6, 2004, pp. 7-12.
16. One of “The Five Types of Coordinated Planning” (wuge tongchao 五个统筹) first enumerated in the key document issued by the 3rd Plenum of the 16th Central Committee in October 2003.
settlements. This approach was subsequently endorsed by central government authorities. In a key national document on design standards for rural reconstruction, issued in 2006, implementation of the “three concentrations” is recommended for all areas with “comparatively dense” rural populations. (16)

In 2006, Shanghai authorities unveiled a new look master plan to guide future development. Known as the “1-9-6-6 Urban System,” it conceptualises Shanghai’s entire administrative territory as a coordinated spatial system with four tiers of settlement comprising one central city (zhongxinche [中心域]), nine “new cities” (xincheng 新城), 60 “new market towns” (xinzhizhen 新市镇) and 600 “central villages” (zhongxinxun 中新村). (19) At the time it was released, the Municipality of Shanghai still had 109 towns (zheng) and 1,862 administrative villages under its jurisdiction. (20)

Shanghai’s “1-9-6-6” plan was particularly significant because of the way it combined a hitherto diverse collection of planning and development policies into a single coordinated scheme, which amounted to a dated urban system that extended across the entire continuum of urban and rural territory. In sum, not only did Shanghai authorities revamp rural planning through the “three concentrations” initiative, but they also linked this to a small town urbanisation strategy and incorporated both into master planning for the entire metropolis. In this respect, the “1-9-6-6” plan established the conceptual framework of “urban and rural integration” (21) on which the new national planning law was to be based.

Zhejiang pioneers “village planning”

In mid-2003, authorities in Zhejiang launched a pilot rural redevelopment program known as “One Thousand Model Villages, Ten Thousand Renovated Villages” (qiancun shifan, wancun zhengzhi 千村示范, 万村整治). The broad objectives of this program were to upgrade village public services and infrastructure and to remediate the problem, as they phrased it, of rural environments being “dirty, chaotic, and backward” (zang, luan, cha 脏, 乱, 差). (22) To provide a specific direction for implementing this program, the Provincial Bureau of Construction issued a document entitled (Trial) Guidelines for Drafting Village Plans. (23) It was the first time in China that a “village plan” (cunzhuang guihua 村庄规划) was officially recognised as a distinct branch of spatial planning in its own right.

According to Zhejiang provincial authorities, in the first five years of the program, 1,181 villages were transformed into “all-round moderately affluent model villages” (quannian xiaokang jianshe shifan cun 全面小康建设示范村) while another 10,303 villages underwent “environmental rehabilitation” (huangzhi zhengzhi 环境整治). (24) In total, around one in three administrative villages in Zhejiang participated in the program, although only one tenth benefited from the full redevelopment package. (25) Despite this limited coverage, Zhejiang’s rural initiative was ground-breaking. Not only did it anticipate the national program to Build a New Socialist Countryside by over two years, it also pioneered technical standards and practices for renovating and reconstructing village settlements. Within a year, other provinces picked up the experiments in Zhejiang: Jiangsu and Jiangxi in 2004, Beijing and Liaoning in 2005. (26) In August 2005, the Ministry of Construction sent a high-level delegation, led by its Minister, to study the program in Jiangxi. Following its favourable report to the State Council, village redevelopment was included as a key component when the national program to Build a New Socialist Countryside was announced in October 2005. (27) Just as conceptual innovations such as the “three concentrations” first appeared within provincial jurisdictions (Jiangsu and Shanghai), so moves to initiate systematic spatial planning at the village level emerged from experimental trials undertaken in a few provincial locations. Prior to this, the village was seen as simply a minor subset of town (zheng 镇) planning. But with the emergence of new urbanisation policies focused on “small cities and towns,” the term came to be understood as an urban rather than rural domain, and regional authorities recognised the need to develop a separate conception of the “village” as a distinct form of built environment.

In 2008, the concept of the “village plan” was given definitive legal status under the new Urban and Rural Planning Law. Previously covered by a range of piecemeal national and local regulations, spatial planning for villages as well as towns and townships has now been brought into the mainstream of national spatial planning law. (28) This makes them subject to two kinds of coordinated planning: first, each is required to produce a long-term master plan setting out land use, functional zoning, infrastructure provision, transport development, and environmental protection within its territory for the following 20 years; and second, each becomes subject to “strategic” regional plans (quyue guihua 区域规划) developed at higher government levels. For example, each province is required to draft a strategic “urban system plan” (chengzhen tixi guihua 城镇体系规划) that sets out the relationships between all cities, county towns, towns, and rural townships. (29) Similarly, at the town level, each jurisdiction has to devise a strategic “town and village location plan” (zhencun buju guihua 镇村布局规划), also referred to as zhencun buyu guihua 镇域规划, (30) that establishes the future number, location, and relationships between the various administrative and “natural” villages within this territory. (31) The strategy...

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(21) “Urban and rural integration” does not necessarily imply that the rural people being “integrated” will have their hukou status automatically transferred from rural to urban. It can just mean moving into urban-style housing, and/or shifting to non-agricultural employment. Moreover, depending on the specific context and circumstances, it can be a voluntary or a coercive process. This terminology now has become common, as the earlier Lusáian Village example demonstrates.
(22) Ming Fang and Aiyun Shao, Xin nongcun jianshe cunzhuang zhili yanjiu (Research on managing village construction for the new countryside), Beijing, Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2006.
(24) Aguo Xia, Fengyu chunqiu kan xiangcun: Zhejiangsheng “qiancun shifan, wancun zhengzhi” gongcheng wunian huimou (The countryside through seasons and years: reflecting on five years of the Zhejiang Province program for “One Thousand Model Villages; Ten Thousand Renovated Villages”), Hangzhou, Zhejiang keji chubanshe, 2009, p. 2.
(28) Ming Fang and Aiyun Shao, Xin nongcun jianshe cunzhuang zhili yanjiu (Research on managing village construction for the new countryside), Beijing, Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 2006; Aiyun Shao and Hui Zhao, Xin nongcun cunzhuang zhengzhi guihua shi (Examples of village renovation plans for the new countryside), Beijing, Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2006.
(30) State Council, Zhonghua renmin gongcheng wunian huimou (The countryside through seasons and years: reflecting on five years of the Zhejiang Province program for “One Thousand Model Villages; Ten Thousand Renovated Villages”), Hangzhou, Zhejiang keji chubanshe, 2009, p. 2.
(32) These terms are not mentioned in the law itself, but derive from Ministry of Construction directives on how to implement the law; the terms appear in all the town-level master plans that I have examined during fieldwork in various rural locations of Hebei, Jiangxi, and Jiangsu.
(33) Villages in China can vary enormously in size from tiny hamlets of a few households to large settlements of several thousand people. To address this problem of scale, the national authorities developed the concept of “administrative villages” (xingzhenbuju guihua), which, as the term suggests, are the basic administrative units of rural China, each governed by a “village committee” of officials and a Communist Party branch. A so-called administrative village may include any number of smaller “natural villages” (xingcun 自然村).
agic plans provide broader levels of regional and national coordination, because they link each territorial jurisdiction to its neighbouring jurisdictions and to the wider development strategies of superior jurisdictions. When a town begins to draft its own master plan, for example, it must ensure that its development plans conform to the strategic plan already established by the county and city governments to which it is subordinate.

In the preceding section I have shown how concepts from urban planning have been increasingly employed to address problems of rural development in key provincial jurisdictions over the last two decades. In Jiangsu the expansion of rural industry led to concerns over the preservation of farmland and hence the decision to adapt “rational” urban planning principles to the organisation of rural land usage. As a result, authorities began to enforce spatial zoning to separate farmland from industrial and residential areas. Municipal leaders in Shanghai expanded on these initiatives to integrate its rural hinterland into a coordinated spatial hierarchy that extended the principles of urban planning across the entire municipality. In Zhejiang, the coordinated planning of rural space was further enhanced through the development of specific technical standards for the renovation, re-design, and re-construction of village settlements. Here the intervention was justified as a response to a decaying rural environment characterised as “dirty, chaotic, and backward.”

It has been through these provincial initiatives that the discourses of urban planning and the discourses of rural rejuvenation have inexorably come together, culminating in the incorporation of rural territory into the formal government regime of spatial planning. Thus, for the first time, rural settlements have come under the same legal planning framework as cities. The objective with this initiative is not only to use urban planning as a mechanism for controlling rampant over-development and for preserving farmland, but also for promoting modernisation of the built environment in those parts of rural China that remain under-developed. The application of urban planning concepts, expertise, and processes to rural China has become a significant component within the larger program to Build a New Socialist Countryside, and has clearly led to the emergence of a new mode and new phase of urbanisation. In the following section of this paper I explore some of the parameters of rural urbanisation through a case study of village redevelopment.

The Qinglong master plan

Qinglong is an administrative village in Jiangsu Province located 22 km southeast of Nanjing’s city centre. In 2006, when its new master plan was first drafted, it had around 1,080 households and a total population of just over 3,200 people spread over 14 separate natural villages ranging in size from 16 to 145 households. The village controls a territory of 10 km², including fertile river flats used for grain and vegetable production, areas of low hills covered in tea plantations, and a more rugged hilly area to the north, which is mostly forested but also has some small quarries. Historically Qinglong has always been under the jurisdiction of Chunhua Town, which was itself subordinate to Jiangning County. In 2000, the county was converted to a district under Nanjing City; then in 2004, the official designations of the subordinate administrative jurisdictions were also “urbanised,” such that Chunhua Town (zhen) became Chunhua Street Office (jiedao banshichu) and Qinglong’s designation was changed from “village” (cun) to “neighbourhood community” (shequ). Since the early 1990s, the term “community” had gradually been adopted to designate the basic administrative unit within urban areas, formerly known as the Residents’ Committee (居居民委员会), but had never been used in reference to rural settlements. While Qinglong is relatively close to Nanjing City, and parts of Jiangning have merged into Nanjing’s urban sprawl, Qinglong itself remains largely rural, with the vast majority of its land still under agricultural production. The decision by Nanjing authorities to apply urban jurisdictional terminology to almost all its subordinate territories, including those that remain largely rural, seems to have been one response to the central government directive calling for the integration of urban and rural areas. But when we examine the Qinglong master plan, we will see that this change in nomenclature was not simply a superficial semantic shift. Rather, it signalled the beginning of a whole range of substantive redevelopment initiatives designed to provide the residents of Qinglong with services, infrastructure, and a built environment that resembled those available to Nanjing’s urban residents. Indeed, the 2006 edition of the Jiangsu Provincial Guidelines for Village Planning and Construction states that one of the key objectives of village redevelopment is to “promote the extension of urban civilisation into the countryside.”

In 2006, Qinglong was chosen by the Jiangning District Government to be one of four district-level “high-standard trial sites” (gao biaozhun shifan dian) for Building a New Socialist Countryside. The District Construction Bureau then commissioned planners from the Jiangsu Academy of Planning and Design to draft master plans for each of the four trial village sites. Qinglong’s plan was approved for implementation in October 2006. The plan is formally entitled Qinglong Community New Countryside Construction Plan, and is divided into three sections respectively titled: “Master Plan,” “Donglong Central Village Short-term Renovation Plan,” and “Donglong Central Village Long-term Renovation Plan.” The first section covers land-use and economic development for the entire territory, while the second and third sections outline a two-part program for the renovation and redevelopment of Qinglong’s largest natural village, Donglong, which had long been host to the administrative and Party headquarters for Qinglong. The new master plan seeks to build on this existing role and enhance...
Donglong’s status as Qinglong’s primary settlement and the site for key public services and administration. For these reasons, its planning and development have been prioritised over other villages.

But the most significant feature of Qinglong’s master plan is the stipulation that its original 14 natural villages will be “concentrated” into three settlements based on the largest three existing villages – Donglong (东龙), Xilong (西龙), and Du Cun (杜村) – meaning that 11 smaller villages and hamlets will be demolished and the residents relocated into new housing developments within the larger settlements. (43) One of the key objectives for “concentrating” settlements, of course, is to save land. According to the Qinglong master plan, the total land used for residential settlements will be reduced from 150 hectares to 63 hectares, saving 87 hectares for other uses. (42) 52 hectares of this land were designated for development of a new industrial park located to the north of Donglong Village. Another 30 hectares were set aside for expanding the existing small public cemetery. In addition, an area of around 140 hectares of tea plantations adjacent to a large water reservoir in the north-east part of Qinglong was designated for tourism development – including facilities for fishing, sightseeing, and accommodation. (43)

Originally approved for implementation in 2006, the Qinglong master plan has subsequently undergone a major round of revision. In the revised version, which appeared in 2010, the industrial zone was expanded to almost double its original size, while the Donglong Village site was extended by an additional 50%. Qinglong officials had to apply to the District government for permission to expand these zones because the changes necessarily encroached on existing farmland.

Renovating Qinglong’s environment

Although the master plan was not formally ratified until October 2006, major efforts to clean up and modernise Qinglong’s built environment began in April as soon as it was designated a "high standard trial site." Following provincial guidelines, the Qinglong leadership began tackling key problems associated with village sanitation, pollution, and basic infrastructure. Known as the “six clean-ups and six set-ups” (六清六建), this initiative required participating villages to implement six specific projects:

1. Clean up rubbish; set up a rubbish management system;
2. Clean up manure; set up a human and animal waste management system;
3. Clean up straw; set up a comprehensive system for re-using all straw;
4. Clean up waterways; set up a water management system;
5. Clean up industrial pollution; set up a stable and standards-based system;
6. Clean up chaotic construction practices; set up a system for managing village appearance. (44)

40. Qinglong Community, Qinglong shequ xin nongcun jianshe guihua (Qinglong Community new countryside construction plan), Nanjing, 2006, p.1.
41. Ibid, p. 10.
42. Ibid, pp. 8-12.
44. Jiangsusheng nongcun renju huanjing jianshe he huanjing zonghe zhengzhi: shidian gongzuo fang'an (Jiangsu Province work program to establish trials in rural areas for improving the environment for human habitation and for overall renovation of the environment), Nanjing, 2005.
By the middle of 2007, Qinglong’s leaders were able to report that all six projects had been implemented fully in the three central villages and partially in the other villages, and that as a result, the former “dirty, chaotic, and backward” local environment had been given a “new look.” According to their report, they had built 60 new large rubbish bins and employed 16 sanitation staff; they had connected every household to piped water, installed flush toilets in each home, established systems for treating sewerage, and had ensured that all open manure pits had been converted into closed composting systems; they had forbidden the burning of straw and organised ways to re-use it in the vegetable fields and tea plantations, and had cleaned and dredged 15 ponds, 3.8 km of waterways, and 1.5 km of floodways – approximately one third of the total. Finally, they had improved the village environment by converting 17.5 km of village roads from dirt to cement, by the demolition of 11 cow sheds, 145 pig pens, and a range of other so-called “dilapidated or illegal constructions,” and by planting around 10,000 trees and 5,000 m² of grass.43

Although not directly specified as part of the “six clean-ups,” Qinglong authorities decided to eliminate domestic pig-breeding from every village under their jurisdiction. They achieved this by classifying household pigsties, traditionally located in courtyards adjacent to homes, as “dilapidated or illegal constructions,” thereby justifying their demolition as part of the program to improve the village’s appearance. To forestall opposition, Qinglong’s leadership agreed to pay each affected household an annual compensation of 300 yuan per person for “meat expenses.”44

While the provincial guidelines were silent on the issue of pig breeding, justification for this intervention can be found in central government documents. In their instructions on village renovation, the Ministry of Construction calls for the “separation of humans and domestic animals” (ren xu fenli 人畜分离)47 on the grounds that keeping animals in residential areas increases the potential for outbreaks of contagious disease and leads to many disputes between neighbours.48 Such problems can be avoided through implementing a “strict separation of residential zones and production zones, so as to establish concentrated residential areas and concentrated livestock and poultry breeding areas.”49 In this pronouncement we find again the emphasis on functional zoning as a key strategy for re-ordering the rural environment. In this case it not only serves to improve village appearance through removing the unsightly pigsties, but also fosters a shift to a larger-scale mode of production that is seen by authorities as more efficient, hygienic, and scientific.

Creating a new civic centre

With the launch of the master plan in late 2006, Qinglong moved from an environmental clean-up phase into a new construction phase. Key projects in this phase included development of the new industrial park and the enhancement of public facilities and services in Donglong. In the past, Qinglong residents had to travel to Chunhua or to Jiangning for anything more than rudimentary medical treatment or to access most of the welfare benefits or government services. Now they enjoy a full range of community services and welfare facilities much closer to home. These include a newly-built community health clinic, a cultural centre, and a community public service counter where local residents can access most welfare and government services with no need to travel farther afield. This service counter is also the site through which new national initiatives such as the rural cooperative health insurance system and the rural minimum living allowance are administered.

The expansion of village facilities and services is reflected in the physical growth of the village’s civic centre. The urban planners have sought to arrange the new facilities into a systematic and logical spatial order based on the underlying principle of functional zoning. Thus, in the second part of the Qinglong master plan, the “Donglong Central Village Short-term Renovation Plan,” the planners explain that they have divided Donglong into three zones: the old village zone, the new village zone, and the public service zone; and that one of the key objectives is to redevelop the current village centre into a “lively and fully-functional public service zone.”50

At the centre of this zone is a 1,200 m² public “cultural” square. Equipped with a stage at one end, the square can be used for cultural performances and for large-scale village meetings. However, the designers also intend for the space to be used more informally for everyday leisure activities. To this end, around the perimeter of the paved area they have provided shady trees, landscaping, seating, and exercise equipment.

Qinglong’s square also serves as a spatial focal point around which a range of other facilities and services are located. Indeed, because of its centrality, the square has been designated as the main location for disseminating information to the public. Along its southern edge, between the square and the footpath that leads from the old village zone towards the cultural centre, the health clinic, and the new village residential area, a long row of glass-covered notice boards have been erected. A wide range of information is provided here, including public health notices, guides to resident services, recent newspapers, reports on community meetings and finances, notices on upcoming cultural events, and educational materials related to wider policies such as family planning. To further underscore its spatial significance as the heart of village life, authorities have installed a large sculpture of a

44. Ibid., Section 2.4.
46. Ibid., Section 2.4.
47. Ministry of Construction, Guanyu cunzhuang zhengzhi gongzuode zhidao yijian (Guiding views on the work of renovating villages), Beijing, 2005, Section 1.4.
48. Ibid., Section 2.4.
49. Ibid., Section 1.4.
rampant dragon right in the middle of the square. Literally embodying the name of the community – Qinglong, or “green dragon” – this sculpture is apparently intended to symbolise the new spirit of vitality and strength that underpins Qinglong’s recent redevelopment and future ambitions.

The other key public facilities are arranged in close proximity to Dragon Square. The cultural centre abuts directly onto the eastern edge of the square, while the community’s administrative headquarters, which houses the public service counter, is located opposite the square, on the other side of the main road. The new health clinic and kindergarten are sited just to the east of the cultural centre, on the southern edge of the new village residential zone. A public bathhouse, built some years previously, sits just beyond the northern edge of the square, while across the village road – which forms the western boundary of the square – can be found Qinglong’s small commercial strip, including two general stores, two simple restaurants, and a hardware store. Although modest by urban standards, the development of services available underpins Qinglong’s recent redevelopment and future ambitions.

New “village” residential development

The next stage in implementing the master plan was to commence the program to “concentrate” the original 14 villages into three “central villages.” The first to be moved was a small hamlet called Wei Cun, whose 35 households were relocated to a new residential estate (xiaouq 小区) on a piece of land immediately to the east of Donglong’s civic centre. Building work commenced in 2008, and according to local officials, the entire project cost around 19 million yuan. Grants from the City and the District contributed 1.3 million, but the rest was paid over three years by Qinglong Community itself from their collective income of around 15 million yuan per year. In order to encourage the residents of Wei Cun to move, the Community offered houses in the new xiaouq on the basis of a one-for-one exchange of space; it’s what they are used to. During construction, especially when the foundations were being laid, there were always at least three villagers on site to inspect and supervise the work. At that stage they didn’t know which house would be whose, but they wanted to make sure that all the construction work was done properly.

The strategy of keeping the village together as a social unit has met with appreciation, as one of the villagers commented in 2011:

Yes, it’s the same as before, nothing has changed. It’s not like in the city where neighbours don’t know each other. Here we all know each other. We’re all still the same people living in close proximity and seeing each other all the time. My mother said to me that she would much rather stay where she knows people and can chat and meet up with friends.

Although the new xiaouq is directly adjacent to the village of Donglong, the planners have sought to maintain a degree of distinctive identity. First, just like an urban xiaouq, this residential area is enclosed and gated, with a two-meter high fence clearly separating it from the rest of Donglong. Secondly, it has been officially named Longwei xiaouq ( 龙薇小区) – combining the “long” from Qinglong and Donglong with the “wei” from Wei Cun – thus symbolising continuity of the old village even as it is appended to a larger settlement. Thirdly, the governance structure of the old Wei Cun hamlet – the villagers’ small group (cunmin xiaozu 村民小组) – has been maintained in the new location.

Yet at the same time, it is difficult to reconcile continuity with the radical disjunction in the built environment. Where the old village was an organic sprawl of vernacular buildings from different periods, consisting of houses, sheds, and yards set among fish ponds, vegetable gardens, and orchards, the order to keep costs down for the new residents. In moving into the new xiaouq, villagers did lose most of their former “private plot” land, but they retain all their agricultural land and their share in the Community’s collective income. Many villagers also earn income through work in local agriculture or industry.

According to Qinglong’s Deputy Party Chief, Wei Cun villagers were consulted in every phase of the planning and development process.

We got every household to select a representative and explained the project to them in detail, then hired a couple of buses to take them to visit some comparatively good rural xiaouq in other parts of Jiangning where they could talk to the locals about their own experiences in relocation. Afterwards at lunchtime we asked them what they thought. They all said, “Great, we support your plan, let’s do it”...Then after we came back we started to design this xiaouq. It’s a rural residential area, it’s not for city people. Rural people all need a bit more space; it’s what they are used to. During construction, especially when the foundations were being laid, there were always at least three villagers on site to inspect and supervise the work. At that stage they didn’t know which house would be whose, but they wanted to make sure that all the construction work was done properly.

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51. Only the actual house and kitchen (which in Qinglong is often separate to the main house) were included in these calculations. Yards, sheds, and other outbuildings were not counted.

52. The Chinese term that is normally translated as “private plot” is more faithfully translated as “self-retained land” (自留地) .The term derives from the period of collectivised agriculture when the vast majority of farmland was worked collectively. Nevertheless, in this period 5-7% of land was distributed to individual families to farm for their own use – often to grow vegetables and fruit to supplement the family’s diet. After de-collectivisation, all farmland was divided up and contracted to families, but the concept of “private plots” was carried over into the new system and continued to be treated as a separate category of land.

53. Interview with Mr. Gao, 26 October 2011.
The new "village" looks like a little piece of contemporary middle-class suburbia. The neat rows of two-story, gable-roofed villas set in landscaped gardens and manicured lawns would not be out of place in the suburbs of any modern Western city. However, the neat vision of contemporary middle-class suburbia is somewhat undermined by the realisation that there is no private land within this residential development. There are no enclosed yards and no internal fences of any sort. The homes sit directly in the midst of the landscaped parkland.

The absence of private yards not only runs counter to our understanding of suburbia, it also breaks with long-standing practice in rural China. Traditionally in many parts of China, the archetypal home was sited within a courtyard, or yuanzi (院子). Ideally the yuanzi is fully enclosed, its entrance marked by an ornamental gate, but in practice, the yuanzi can still be functionally present even without physical enclosure. Often it is simply a cluster of structures – houses, sheds, out-buildings – where the family’s possessions are stored and arranged. In old Wei Cun, like the other villages of Qinglong, some yards were enclosed and some were not; nevertheless, all of them had a yuanzi of some kind. Functionally, the yuanzi facilitates certain types of familial social interactions. Many yuanzi contain more than one conjugal family unit – often the parents and one or more of their married children (usually but not always sons) will have separate homes within the yuanzi. In this situation, the yuanzi provides a spatial structure to mediate and order the relationships between branches of an extended family unit. The new xiaoqu is not designed to accommodate these kinds of relationships, because each household is distinctly demarcated from every other within an open, transparent and geometrically ordered public space. The yuanzi tends to blur the distinction between inside and outside, as residents move between buildings within the yuanzi for cooking and eating, carrying out chores, feeding domestic animals, and socialising with other family members. In contrast, the xiaoqu is inscribed with a rigid binary spatial code based on a transparent differentiation between inside and outside. Inside the home is private, but as soon as residents walk outside the door they have entered the open public domain. While the xiaoqu itself is an enclosed compound, its enclosure operates at the scale of the "village" rather than the family unit. This is "collective" or "community" space, landscaped and regulated under the management of Qinglong authorities. Unlike in the old village, there is no in-between space, simply a numbered front door that marks the boundary between inside and outside and recodes it as a threshold between private and public.

The loss of the yuanzi is part of a spatial reconfiguration that results both from the imperative to save land and from the desire to modernise rural life. The old Wei Cun occupied 110 mu of land, while the new residential area only takes up about 40 mu. Land has been "saved" through eliminating the yuanzi as well as the vegetable plots, fish ponds, orchards, and animal enclosures. One of the villagers explained these changes in the following way in 2011:

In the old village there is more space and no walls, so you need dogs to protect your place; you also have plenty of space to breed ducks and chickens. But in this enclosed xiaoqu you don’t need to worry about safety so you don’t need dogs; and there is not enough space now for poultry.

Actually, there is a great deal of open space within the xiaoqu, certainly more than enough to provide areas for poultry raising. What he seems to mean is that there is no appropriate space for poultry, nowhere that they belong in the new spatial regime that underpins this urban-style xiaoqu. For if the homes don’t have yards, then where could the poultry live?

The modernity of the new "village" is not only embodied in its architectural and spatial forms, and in the exclusion of productive animals, but also through the provision of a full complement of contemporary technologies that previously have been found only in urban residential areas: hot and cold running water, sewerage, cooking gas, and digital broadband cable. Old Wei Cun was not connected to sewers, gas, or communications. The connection of each household to running water through the advent of domestic plumbing replaces communal water supply and public bathing with privatised modes of personal hygienic practice. Meanwhile, the new digital broadband cable connects the residents of Longwei xiaoqu to a vast world of information and entertainment. Of course, villagers formerly had some access to these networks through broadcast television and mobile telephones, but the broadband cable increases the volume and ease of access by many magnitudes: villagers now can watch more than 100 TV channels and view many thousands of internet sites.

For the new residents of Longwei xiaoqu, the implications are both structuring and enabling: the technologies that underpin the form and the functioning of the new "village" circumscribe their everyday lives in significant new ways. At the same time, their connection to these technological networks opens up new possibilities for engagement with, and mobility across, other parts of the network.

However, not every resident of the old Wei Cun is attracted to the apparent benefits of the new xiaoqu and the technologies it embodies. Mr. and Mrs. Guo don’t want to move. Although they have been given two units in the new xiaoqu (their son and daughter-in-law have already moved into

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55. Of course there are different degrees of privacy within different parts of the home; from the less private spaces of the kitchen, the living room, and the dining room to the more private spaces of bedrooms. For an account of transformations in rural home design and its implications for "privacy," see Yunxiang Yan, Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 112-139.
one unit) they prefer to stay in their old home of four decades. Even as all the neighbouring homes are demolished around them, they are determined to hold out as long as possible. At first it seemed their main concern was what they believe to be inadequate financial compensation for the fruit trees, fish ponds, and vegetable gardens they have to give up as part of the move.\(^{(57)}\) But in my most recent meeting with them it became clear that they have more fundamental objections, as Mr. Guo explained:

“There’s nothing for us to do in that place. You’re not allowed to grow vegetables or raise chickens and ducks there. We’re old farmers, not city people or workers… And why should we pay for water and cooking gas when we get those things for free here? We have a well full of fresh mountain spring water and plenty of wood, straw, and chaff for cooking. You even have to pay for the water to flush your shit away over there!\(^{(58)}\)”

Former neighbours who have already moved into the new xiaoqu are far from sympathetic, suggesting that the Guos are simply greedy and are holding out for more compensation. However, it seems clear that beyond the issues of compensation and the fear of higher costs of living, the Guos are just not attracted to the way of life on offer in the new xiaoqu. Apparently, the lure of modern plumbing, cable TV, cooking gas, and landscaped gardens cannot overcome their deeply entrenched attachment to a familiar if simpler way of life. Ultimately, the apparently utopian aim to integrate urban and rural China relies upon the ability to persuade villagers to give up land and to transform their way of life. While many are no doubt happy to make this shift to an urban-style life, others will resist until dislodged by coercive force.

**Conclusions**

My objectives in this paper have been twofold: first I sought to reconstruct the key moves that resulted in urban planning taking a rural turn in China; and secondly I endeavoured to illustrate the momentous implications of this turn through describing the implementation of an actual village “master plan.” My interest in the program to Build a New Socialist Countryside, or in rural redevelopment in general, does not lie in the field of political economy. No doubt some readers will feel that I have neglected many details concerning the state/society relations, the political connections, and the funding arrangements associated with this village redevelopment project. However, if I have neglected these questions, it is because I wanted to devote more attention to understanding the actual physical transformations to the village built environment. Thus, my question was not “How did village officials raise the money to build all this stuff?” Rather, it was “What did they build, what were they trying to achieve and how did the transformed built environment impact village life?”

As well as asking some different questions, my research suggests some different conclusions. For example, in their otherwise illuminating study of rural development in Shaanxi and Zhejiang, Ahlers and Schubert reach two conclusions that do not gel with my findings. First, in characterising the program to Build a New Socialist Countryside as a “macro-policy,” they argue that it provides only “rough guidelines for implementation while delegating the main work of policy concretization to local governments.”\(^{(19)}\)

My study on the redevelopment of rural built environments, however, demonstrates that this part of the program has been driven by a highly centralised spatial planning regime, which mandates very detailed standards and specifications for design and construction. Secondly, their argument that China’s current emphasis on rural urbanisation simply mimics a development model from Europe and industrialised East Asia ignores the specific genealogical processes through which Chinese discourses of urban planning merged with discourses of rural rejuvenation, as described in this paper, to create a unique strategy for rural urbanisation. Illustrated through a case study of the Qinglong master plan, I have shown that while this form of spatial planning enforces a modernist, urban-style vision of the built environment, it is also underpinned by an ethos of continuity, which seeks to hold rural communities together even as their everyday lives are re-inscribed through radical socio-technical interventions.

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57. Interview with Mrs. Guo, 24 November 2009. The Guos have around 5 mu of private plot surrounding their home in the old Wei Cun, but will qualify for only 0.2 mu of vegetable land adjacent to the new xiaoqu.

58. Interview with Mr. Guo, 22 July 2012.

Urbanising the Rural: 
Local strategies for creating “new style” rural communities in China

LIOR ROSENBERG

ABSTRACT: The transition from traditional rural residences to urban-like multi-storey buildings and from traditional villages to rural residential communities (shequ) is one of rural China’s most profound developments of the early twenty-first century. Official discourse highlights the potential benefits for villagers, portraying the new residential communities as gateways to modernity and significant steps toward reducing inequality and disparity between the rural and the urban. Based on extensive research in two counties in Shandong and Anhui provinces, this article concludes that while imposing urban-like models of residence may coincide with prosperous communities’ circumstances, it may easily become a statist venture of predation and a source of tension and rural discontent in less prosperous communities.

KEYWORDS: urbanisation, rural China, communities, inequality, state-society relations.

Earlier studies have made a distinction between two trajectories of urbanisation in China. The first path refers to state-planned development based on large-scale industries in China’s large cities. The second refers to towns or small city-based urban developments that rely mainly on local initiatives and resources. Laurence J.C. Ma and Ming Fan have entitled these “urbanisation from above” and “urbanisation from below.” At the heart of both trajectories of urbanisation, though, lies the same demographic phenomenon: migration of the farming populace away from rural areas into urban settlements in search of jobs and a better life.

In this article I focus on what may be perceived as a new stage of urbanisation in China. The innovativeness of China’s new program lies in its scope, which transcends the normal scope of the urban (expanding cities/towns or expansion of successful villages into towns). Instead, it seeks to urbanise the rural by imposing urban-like models of residence on rural residents, many of whom are still farmers. As part of this, it is common that villages are merged with other villages, and villagers are moved into townhouses or multi-storey apartment buildings, creating a “new style” of rural residential communities (xinling nongcun shequ) with modern facilities and better services. Often local officials locate these new settlements adjacent to rural towns, serving as de facto suburbs and embodying new kinds of relations between rural and urban populaces by integrating both systems (services, labour markets, governing institutions, etc.). As David Bray demonstrates in his article in this journal issue, central and local state fiats and directives play a crucial role in determining the creation of these communities and their appearance. This policy is still in its experimentation stage and has mainly influenced the richer and more developed areas. Yet as this policy gains popularity within the Party and central government as a key factor to solving rural problems, it is not unrealistic to foresee that current experiments will be further expanded nationwide. As will be observed, however, while urban models of residence fit well with prosperous communities’ circumstances, they do not match the local capabilities of less prosperous communities. Construction of residential communities requires significant financing, which local governments and villages may find hard to obtain. Moreover, urban-style residential compounds are not attuned to villagers’ needs and traditions, a much more salient issue in agricultural communities than in industrialising ones.

Methodology

To investigate how the campaign of constructing rural communities was being implemented, I conducted extensive fieldwork over the period 2009-2011 in two counties – Chenggu County in Shandong Province and Beian County in Anhui Province. In total I studied six townships and some 20 villages in Chenggu and eight villages from six different townships in Beian. I conducted semi-structured interviews with officials from villages, townships, and the county level. In addition, I had numerous conversations, formal and informal, with village residents to learn about their perceptions and attitudes. These were mainly conducted in Chenggu, where I enjoyed better access to villages due to research permits and better transportation facilities.

Chenggu and Beian counties share several similarities. Both are located relatively close to provincial capitals (Jinan in Shandong and Hefei in Anhui); both are considered the most developed counties in their prefectures and one by no means considered poor; both are populated entirely by Han people; and both counties contain a population of about 700,000 people. Yet they differ significantly in terms of economic development. Chenggu is much more developed than Beian. Its total GDP is five times higher than Beian’s, and the incomes of Chenggu’s rural residents average 33% higher. As an industrialised county, far more villages in Chenggu have substantial collective incomes (jiti shouru) from land rentals and publicly-owned enterprises.

Research was done through the department of Political and Social Change, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.


3. To ensure anonymity, both counties’ names have been changed.
The “old” countryside – Impediments to modernity

The emergence of a market economy in China starting in the 1980s was accompanied by an unfortunate expansion of economic and social disparity and inequality. The state has contributed significantly to this with its deliberate prioritisation of developing cities and the urban economy. Since the early 2000s, however, the Party has been pushing towards a redefinition of urban-rural relations. This was explicitly articulated in 2004, at the fourth plenum of the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party (NCCPC), where Hu Jintao raised the thesis of the “two trends” (liang ge quxiang 两个方向). This locates the past and the future on a prolonged path of development, which allegedly coincides with “generalisable” trends of development. In this account, at initial stages of industrialisation there is a general trend for agriculture to support industries and villages to support cities. However, after a considerable level of industrialisation has been achieved, it is a trend to reverse these relations and push industries and cities to support rural communities. (9) According to the Party, China was ready for a change of policy.

While the state has perceived its own role in the expansion of disparities as reversible, it has held as officially irreversible some of the most basic characteristics of rural life, which are deemed serious impediments to modernisation and China’s prospects of establishing a developed national economy. Yang Shisong, a member of the leadership of a municipal Party School, points to five impediments. As this articulates official discourse, it is worthwhile recapitulating them one by one.

The first point refers to life inside villages, conceptualising the villages as “dirty (zang 脏), chaotic (luan 乱), and poor (cha 差).” Many surveys published inside the PRC have lamented rural areas’ poor infrastructure and public amenities. A report published by the Academy of Social Sciences in 2005, for example, found that in the early 2000s, 300 million people in rural China still did not have access to running water. (8) About 50% of the villages did not have access to running water; 40,000 administrative villages were still inaccessible by public road; and roads to 70% of China’s villages were not paved. In more than 50% of the villages people still used firewood and straw as sources of heating and cooking; 20 million people were still not connected to electricity; (9) 7% of the villages did not have access to telephones, and 50 million villagers were not connected to TV or radio. (9)

Many villages in Beian and in the more developed county of Chenggu suffered unfortunate neglect. Most roads and alleys inside the villages were likely to be dirt, and villages became very muddy after rains. In Beian, arterial roads between villages were dirt as well, and transport was almost impossible after heavy rains or snow.

Most villages had poor hygienic environments. In many villages there was no separation between residences and livestock-raising areas, and in Beian the livestock wandered freely between houses in many of the villages. In most cases, villagers used soft coal for heating. There was no heating in many rural houses in Beian, and winter nights were very cold. Villagers used fire wood for cooking. Flush toilets were not common and people often disposed of the waste themselves.

When entering many of the villages in both counties, the first thing noticed was garbage thrown everywhere – on the main roads, in small alleys, drainage ditches, as well as in improvised dumps on the village outskirts. In many villages, arable land served as “empty-trash sites.” Partly as a result of villagers’ lack of concern and cultural conventions, (9) suitable means of disposing of garbage in the villages was lacking.

Villages also tended to lack cultural and leisure facilities. Public yards and sport facilities were very old and dilapidated, if they existed at all. The main facilities in Chenggu were the village leadership’s office (although not necessarily up-to-standard), an accessible health clinic, a small grocery shop (selling mainly dry goods), and a local agricultural supplies shop. In Beian, where the administrative villages have significantly larger populations, each administrative village had its own primary school, (10) and some had a small hospital in addition to the village clinic. Small-scale commerce was also more common in villages in Beian, such as small eateries and shops selling basic daily required goods. For all other services and needs, the people in both counties needed to travel to the rural towns.

Finally, villages were also likely to lack master plans to guide development. In Beian, for example, new housing was laid out mainly in accordance with people’s individual wishes, as long as they did not violate local construction regulations. In Chenggu, villages had plans in place long before the call to “build the new socialist countryside” was made. Yet, as several officials explained, these plans were very general, normally including only residential areas, and in reality were not strictly enforced. Occasionally, the size and

6. These figures are officially cited by the Ministry of Water Resources. See www.mwr.gov.cn/english/sdw/html (accessed on 8 July 2013).
7. According to Zifeng Sun, villagers were also likely to pay significantly more for electricity than their counterparts in the cities. See “Zhufang cunzhuang jianshe” (Housing and village construction), in Xiong Jingming (ed.), Jindai Zhongguo nongcun (Modern Chinese Countryside) (accessed on 8 July 2013).
10. In the past, every village in Chenggu County had its own primary school as well, but most of them were already merged into large modern schools located in the townships’ seats or in large villages.
shape of the housing plots was a legacy of the 1980s or earlier, and rural inhabitants often built their houses in a haphazard pattern with narrow alleys running between them. In both counties it was common to see rural houses in various models, shapes, and sizes standing next to each other.

Yang's second point refers to a waste of land. China’s rapid economic development and the erasure of previous restrictions on physical mobility have changed traditional residential patterns in the countryside. In a period of growing prosperity, many villagers have been building new houses for themselves or for their children, often occupying agricultural land. The new houses tend to require large plots of land, as it is common for the residential compounds to include private yards for daily usage. (11) At the same time, many millions of village families have been flowing to China’s cities to take up jobs, leaving behind houses that are empty for most or all of the year. This emigration, according to Yang, causes a serious waste of land.

Yang’s third point refers to the dispersed deployment of villages in the countryside and the tendency of rural communities to be small in terms of population size. As a result, investment in infrastructure, public amenities, and services becomes excessively expensive, impeding the possibility of providing adequately for the needs of each locality.

The fourth point refers to rural economic patterns that render it difficult to adjust to the developing market economy. This includes factors such as fragmented land (due to the tiny plots of household farming), the prevalence of small-scale family economic ventures, decentralisation in decision-making, and old-fashioned business philosophy. As a whole, this hinders the possibility of creating economies of scale and introducing new technology, and ultimately impedes modernisation of the rural economy.

Yang’s fifth and last point refers to the low capacity of local investment. This is a result of low incomes and the absence of financial surpluses; unwillingness to invest in undertakings that do not produce immediate and direct profit or personal benefit; weakening rural community collective consciousness; and increasing difficulty in forming a consensus to engage in common undertakings and construction. (12)

The solution to these impediments, according to Yang Shisong, is the creation of a new style of rural community.

**Constructing rural communities: Urbanising the rural**

In 2005, during the fifth plenum of the 16th NCCPC, a call was officially issued to “build a new socialist countryside” (BNSC) as a far-reaching solution to rural problems. Behind this call was the acknowledgment by Chinese policymakers that inequality and economic disparity, most notably between the rural and urban populations, had reached a worrisome level and could no longer be ignored. In October 2006, at the sixth plenary session of the 16th NCCPC, a call was conveyed to “actively promote the building of rural communities” as an indispensable part of the BNCS scheme.

The concept of communities is not new in China. The well-known Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong introduced the concept of shequ in the early 1930s as his translation of the word “community” in its sociological meaning of Gemeinschaft. (13) The word, however, disappeared from public discourse when sociology was banned in the early 1950s and returned to official and scholarly discourse only in the 1980s, when sociology was rehabilitated as a discipline. (14) In the early 2000s, the Ministry of Civil Affairs reintroduced “communities” as a new form of administrative organisation in urban governance. According to David Bray, the creation of urban communities was mainly a result of the state’s inability to “meet the demand for social services brought about by the rapid socio-economic transformation of urban China since the mid-1980s.” (15) The solution was to create new neighbourhood-based administrative units in order to enable the state to regain its capacity to manage the urban populace.

According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, a central aspect of the urban neighbourhood community is the provision of services to its inhabitants. According to the Ministry’s instructions, these should include: (1) welfare services to those in need; (2) health services; (3) public cultural facilities, activities rooms, sports and cultural events, etc.; (4) beautification of the community, enhancing cleanliness, greenification, and local awareness of environmental protection; (5) and community policing and educating the people to act according to the law, providing legal consultation, civil mediation, obeying the policy of family planning, etc. (16) Typically, the structural characteristics of the urban communities include (1) a scale of 1,000-1,500 households living in apartment blocks; (2) clear boundaries, often through the creation of walled compounds; (3) and the establishment of activity centres. (17)

As in the case of urban communities, the government introduced the reshaping of rural communities as a remedy to poor rural organisation and service delivery. Unlike the cities, in which the bolstering of community life may be viewed as innovative vis-à-vis the nature of modern cities, in Chinese rural areas the notion of communal life is almost innate. (18) From an official viewpoint, the superiority of the new rural communities over traditional rural villages lies in the larger population sizes, as authorities often expect several villages to form a community in a new residential location. This modern living environment among a concentrated population is supposed to enable villagers to enjoy living conditions and public amenities similar to the cities, in complete contrast to the “dirty, chaotic, and poor” characteristics of the dispersed villages.

As David Bray observes in his article in this journal issue, urban-style housing has become the model for the whole nation. Inside the communities, inhabitants are expected to enjoy modern housing and high accessibility to services. While the responsibility for importing urban-like models of architecture lies in the hands of the Construction Bureau, responsibility for services lies in the hands of the Ministry of Civil Affairs. According to the Ministry, services entail social assistance to those in need, maintaining public order, health care, family planning, education, and sports. (19) The list coincides perfectly with the Ministry’s expectations of urban communities. To ensure a high degree of accessibility, the Ministry’s instruction is that all

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11. Andrew Kipnis, Producing Guanxi: Sentiments, Self and Subculture in a North China Village, Durham, Duke University Press, 1997, p. 41. See also David Bray’s article in this journal issue.
15. Ibid., p. 544.
18. See, for example, Ferdinand Tonnies, Community and Society, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1957. First published in Germany in 1887.
services must be provided within a radius of no more than 2-3 kilometres from homes and no more than 20 minutes’ walking distance.\(^{(20)}\)

**Urbanising the rural in Chenggu County, Shandong Province**

The transition from traditional villages to rural residential communities has been rapid in a substantial part of rural Shandong. In 2007, the Ministry of Civil Affairs selected 251 counties nationwide to serve as experimental sites for the creation of new rural communities, one of which was Chenggu. The two leading provinces on this list were Shandong (34 counties) and Jiangsu (33 counties). Together these two provinces served as a vanguard, leaving the rest of the provinces far behind.\(^{(21)}\) By the end of 2011, the Ministry of Civil Affairs designated 106 counties as national “model units” (shifan danwei 示范单位) in the project of constructing the new rural communities. The leading province by far was Shandong, with 27 model counties.\(^{(22)}\)

Although Chenggu was not a model unit, its local officials took on communities as a high priority. In 2009, the county drew up a grandiose plan in which all of its 840-plus villages would be concentrated into 173 residential communities. Most of these communities were to host several villages living together. In that year, the deputy governor of Shandong Province conducted an inspection tour in Chenggu, during which he praised the county and especially one of its wealthiest townships where the project of constructing rural communities has developed fastest, and urged it to continue with this project as an example for the entire province. By mid-2011, construction had already started in 67 communities, of which 46 were in advanced stages of construction.\(^{(23)}\)

Interestingly, all of the village, township, and county officials in Chenggu County to whom I spoke warmly welcomed the idea of creating rural residential communities. No doubt, provincial support for the policy and the selection of Chenggu as an experimental site put pressure on the county to push the construction of rural communities further. Yet it would be wrong to attribute their support to this factor only, as the officials I interviewed seemed to believe in the benefits of the project, and they gave several reasons. First, they said, the concentration of scattered villages into higher density residential areas would facilitate provision of public amenities and services to the villagers, a main BNSC goal. They also explained that such a project was affordable: the county was prosperous, and in most cases the construction of the new communities’ public areas did not burden the villagers with compulsory payments, as building was paid out of income from the villages’ collectively owned assets, local governmental subsidies, local publicly owned business groups, and voluntary contributions, in some cases from the villagers themselves.

No subsidies, however, were available for housing construction, and the villagers were expected to pay all of the cost of their new homes. But as land for new houses was provided free by the village, and villagers were only required to pay for construction costs, a new rural house/apartment cost only about 20% of the price of housing in the township and county seats. Local officials in most townships and villages thought villagers could afford this expense.

Local officials’ second consideration was the need to save land. Officials from Chenggu’s Construction Bureau estimated in 2011 that when all residential communities had been fully constructed and villagers had moved into apartment buildings, the county would be able to free 88,000 mu of land for agricultural and industrial uses. It is not surprising that local officials were keen to free up land, as extra available land is important not only for increasing household earnings, an important BNSC goal, but also as a potential boost to local government revenues. The abolition of rural taxes and fees in the early 2000s crippled local rural governments’ capacity to generate revenue, so local officials turned to land as a source of finance. Illegal seizure and selling of villagers’ land has become a widespread phenomenon in China. When I conducted fieldwork in Chenggu in 2011, the transition of rural inhabitants into residential communities had only recently begun. Officials insisted that even after transformation the land would still belong to the communities. All villagers I talked to confirmed that land remained under their village’s control. Yet what is true today will not necessarily be true tomorrow. Whether local officials will attempt to use or sell the new acreage of vacant land is a matter for the future. After all, clearing land for new factory sites in the industrialised townships can generate new sources of revenue.

The importance of saving land is also manifest in the need to keep a minimum level of agricultural land (the so-called “red line”). According to the Law of Land Administration (1998), any occupation of agricultural land for non-agricultural usage must be accompanied by reclamation of the same amount of land of the same quality (article 31). Thus agricultural land reclamation in the county enables industrialisation on other plots of land.

In several villages I was told by local officials and inhabitants that local publicly owned business groups were investing in the construction of the compact high-rise communities. Officials insisted that these local business groups provided voluntary contributions.\(^{(24)}\) Yet inhabitants of one of the county’s most industrialised villages claimed that a contract had already been signed with a local business group promising it rights to the cleared land. According to them, the details of the contract were not transparent and village officials had never consulted them.

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23. Interview with officials from the Construction Bureau, Chenggu County, 18 May 2011.
In short, land value is an important factor in the transition from villages to residential communities. At the time of my study, local officials deliberately chose first the wealthier villages, located near the county seat and in industrialising rural townships, to move and free their land. Lastly, for many officials the transition from traditional rural houses to modern apartments symbolises the transition from backwardness to modernity. Many also equate lives in the villages to those in rural cities (the ultimate goal of BNSC) but also to those in developed Western countries. Clearly on this issue, though certainly not always on other topics, local officials’ views coincide with the view of the central state.

For Chenggu officials, urbanisation in the county means the development of rural towns and urbanised rural communities and a better integration of these two systems. In light of this view, many of the new rural communities are being constructed adjacent to the country towns, serving as their de facto suburbs, sharing the towns’ services, infrastructure, and labour markets. Also contributing to the integration is the very good road network in the county, which facilitates bus transportation from all of the villages/new rural communities to the towns and the county’s economic zones. Many of the roads inside the county had already been paved in the early 1990s. However, as a result of the national policy of paving roads between administrative villages to establish a sub-county transportation network connecting villages, a second wave of road paving was launched by the county in 2003. According to the county’s statistical yearbook, in 2007 all but ten villages located in the county’s poorest township had roads accessible to cars. Although cars are still rare in most of the villages, small motorcycles are common and serve as a popular mode of transportation. All of the main roads to the township seats I visited are multi-lane and well paved, and buses run regularly all day long from the county capital to the townships. In 2004, all villages had already been connected to the bus network, offering the villagers bus services to both the township towns and the county seat. In 2010, the county government announced a new policy under which buses were to go through every village/community in the county (and not only to within one kilometre of a village, as was the case till then) and to offer subsidised transportation services, for which the county allocated 10 million yuan annually. The official deadline to complete this network was the end of 2011, a goal interviewees from the transportation bureau were confident of meeting. This excellent transportation network was expected to enable villagers to conveniently commute to work by bus every day while still living in their rural communities.

The transition from rural villages to urban-like communities embodies significant changes in villagers’ lives. According to local plans, in most cases where several villages are merged a new community’s population is expected to reach 2,000-4,000 inhabitants, whereas the average village in Chenggu currently only contains several hundred people. Often a new residential community, as in the cities, is surrounded by walls, accentuating its boundaries, its incorporation of villagers, and its integral identity vis-à-vis other communities. Inside the community multi-storey apartment buildings stand side by side.

All of the new apartments I visited in Chenggu were equipped with granite or tile floors and with modern facilities such as running water, solar water heaters, modern kitchens with methane gas for cooking, hygienic toilets, internet facilities, air conditioners, and in some of the villages even central heating systems. These amenities contrast sharply with the old, dirty, crude, and very basic facilities in the rural houses villagers had left behind.

All of the paths leading to and between the houses inside the community’s jurisdiction were paved, a sharp contrast to the muddy-after-rain appearance of old-fashioned villages. As in the cities, local officials made the new living environments cleaner and greener. Trees, shrubs, and flowers were planted along the main roads and public areas, and garbage disposal facilities were introduced or improved. Streetlights were installed along the main roads, and in some cases surveillance cameras have been installed in the residential communities “to ensure the villagers’ safety.” Public squares and sport facilities such as croquet courts, basketball courts, and outdoor sports facilities have been introduced in each rural community. Reading rooms have been constructed, offering reading material in residents’ leisure time. Small-scale supermarkets have also been built, significantly larger than the previous grocery stores that operated in the villages, easing the previous inconvenience of buying daily products outside the village in the township seat or at rural markets. Often retirement homes have been built as well, to which villagers can move after the age of 60.

Service centres have been built where residents can submit applications relating to issues such as birth control and land and residential approvals, which previously were accessed only in the township seat. This not only benefits the villagers but also reduces pressure on the township administration. Other services include local policing, civil mediation, welfare support, social security, economic assistance to those in need, pre-schools, schools, and health clinics offering doctors and drugstore services.

Notwithstanding these many advantages, moving to apartments may also embody adverse changes in villagers’ living habits and customs. Apartments are often smaller than traditional rural housing. Social networks may be interrupted since people in most cases find themselves with new neighbours. Villagers no longer have an internal courtyard, which had many uses, such as corralling livestock, planting vegetables for self-consumption, or as storage place. When people move to a new area, they may find it less convenient than before, for example if they live far from their agricultural land. Finally, in most of the villages I visited in Chenggu, people are expected to move before getting compensation for their old houses or confiscated agricultural land. In light of all these factors, one may wonder, why do they agree to move?

25. The distance from the county seat to its most remote border at the northeast part is about a one-hour drive by car.
The following is based on the many conversations I had with villagers in Chenggu. First and foremost, villagers move because they perceive the shift from the "old" and backward villages to living in a modern and hygienic environment as a "fair deal," even if that means living in smaller housing units. In addition, in developed Chenggu, villagers acknowledge the importance of saving land as a means for further industrialisation and wealth accumulation. A third factor refers to perceptions. During my conversations it became clear that for many villagers the transition from rural houses to apartments symbolises a transition from backwardness to modernity, and living in apartments is "living like in the cities," a notion embraced by many of the villagers. Lastly, all the communities that I visited were built fairly close to the original "old" villages. The new location therefore was not perceived by the villagers as an issue. They were still living close to their land, and even though previous neighbours may not share the same building, villagers still live together in the same residential compound and maintain social networks as easily as before. In new communities where several villages were expected to reside together, the new residential buildings are allocated per village to ensure that villagers from the same village continue to reside together. In many of the new multi-storey buildings, warehousing space and enclosed parking lots are allocated along with the apartments (or can be bought separately), providing even better storage than before. Thus local officials' positive perception of establishing residential communities coincided with the viewpoint not only of their superiors but also of many of the villagers.

Yet some villagers harbour suspicions about the new lifestyle. Regardless of individual economic conditions that may impede the possibility of buying a new apartment, there were other causes for hesitation. Villagers may consider it more convenient to stay in their old ramshackle ground-level house than to live in a modern clean apartment on the fifth floor without an elevator (if they could not afford to buy a more expensive unit on a lower floor). In addition, some simply prefer living amidst rural nature rather than in dense urban-like residential compounds. Especially in villages in which inhabitants are more dependent on agriculture and other rural undertakings, villagers still live together in the same residential compound and maintain social networks as easily as before. In new communities where several villages were expected to reside together, the new residential buildings are allocated per village to ensure that villagers from the same village continue to reside together. In many of the new multi-storey buildings, warehousing space and enclosed parking lots are allocated along with the apartments (or can be bought separately), providing even better storage than before. Thus local officials’ positive perception of establishing residential communities coincided with the viewpoint not only of their superiors but also of many of the villagers.

Notwithstanding these concerns, my overall impression was that cases of reluctance were a minority and mostly occur before and during the early stages of the transition. As long as they can afford it, ultimately most villagers seem to support leaving their old village. Normally when a new community is being built, the construction is conducted in several stages and not all apartment buildings are constructed at the same time. There are several reasons for this, among them financial constraints. Moving whole villages requires significant financial investment, while gradual construction can ensure a circulation of liquid finances. Lack of available land is another important reason. Often there is not enough land available for the entire construction project. In these cases, some of the apartment buildings are constructed first, and then after villagers have moved and their old houses were demolished, new apartment buildings are constructed on the evacuated land. Another important reason is to ensure that apartments do not stay empty when construction is over. In some cases villagers who wish to move may be asked to commit first, and only after a considerable number of households have committed will construction start. In other villages, officials were confident that by the time the first stage of construction was finished there would be enough households wishing to inhabit the new buildings. Moreover, officials believed that the best strategy to reduce cases of reluctance is to show sceptics a completed building so that they can witness the many benefits embedded in living in modern residences. In all of the villages I visited that were in a period of transition, the first to move were normally the villages’ officials and young people, while others moved after learning from the experience of those who had already moved.

Officials tended to disparage the reluctant movers. For them, the new residences represent a new dawn for the countryside. The entrance to the new communities symbolises the entrance to modernity and to a better world. Why would a rational person resist such an opportunity? Especially in the richer areas of the county, officials also tend to disparage the notion that families face economic constraints, and in many villages and townships I was told that these simply do not exist (many villagers, though, have claimed the opposite). When asked about the possibility that villagers may find themselves residing next to unwanted neighbours, an official in one of Chenggu’s most developed communities was decisive in his answer: “Hasn’t this occurred in the cities as well? If you don’t like your neighbour you can always buy an apartment in another building.” 26 Officials made very clear that for them any reluctance to move was first and foremost a manifestation of backwardness of the villagers. Urbanising the rural is not only about constructing urban-like residential communities and improving services; it is also about urbanising the people’s minds and the creation of “new villagers” of “higher quality” (suzhi 素质).

Urbanising the rural in Beian county, Anhui Province

After the announcement of the BNAC scheme in 2006, officials in Beian started to introduce better infrastructure and public amenities in villages. These included paving all roads inside and between the villages, which in Beian were all dirt roads before 2006; installing running water; greening and beautifying the villages; introducing and/or improving garbage disposal facilities; and introducing cultural facilities such as public squares, basketball courts, outdoor sports facilities, and reading rooms. Yet unlike in Chenggu, officials in Beian were reluctant to construct new residential communities and multi-storey apartment building compounds. Why have officials in Beian not welcomed this as officials in Chenggu did? Why would they resist constructing “a gateway to modernity”?

The first important reason was that Beian was not included in the national list of experimental counties to construct rural communities. Without pressure from above, it was left to county officials to decide, and they have mainly used local economic factors to decide their development. Officials in Beian assumed, probably rightly, that requiring people to move to new homes or apartments will invoke serious resentment, possibly even social unrest, an outcome they try to avoid as much as possible. They suspect two main groups of residents would resist buying new housing and leaving their old villages. The first group consists of those who recently constructed a new house. As a less industrialised and less economically developed county, wealth accumulation in Beian is a slower process than in Chenggu, and many of the county’s villagers have built new houses only recently. In most cases these houses are quite large (most of them are two-storey houses) and still in good condition. These villagers therefore do not feel the need to move. Moreover, unlike officials in Chenggu, officials in Beian perceive buy-

26. Interview with township officials, Chenggu County, 16 June 2009.
ing new housing, which costs about the same as in Chenggu although incomes in Beian are lower, as a gigantic expense for households. Thus, they estimate that the villagers are unlikely to agree to move without getting adequate compensation, which the county in its current financial condition cannot afford paying.

The second group officials consider potentially problematic are the younger villagers. As the county cannot provide employment opportunities to all of its inhabitants, about a third of its entire population are migrant workers who are absent from the village for most of the year. Officials estimate that they are likely to refuse to buy new houses that they cannot use. Also, unlike in Chenggu where saved land can be translated into further wealth accumulation both for rural inhabitants and the local government, in most Beian villages the realistic scenario is agricultural land extension. Taking into account the unprofitability of agriculture for villagers and even more so to local governments’ revenue, the county government decided that developing the local labour market and attracting investors were much more urgently needed than reclaiming agriculture land and urbanising out-migrating communities.

Finally, as Beian villages do not enjoy any significant collective income and therefore do not have collective revenues to support redevelopment of public village facilities, the success of any redevelopment is heavily dependent upon the willingness of the villagers to pay for new infrastructure themselves. Constructing new rural residential communities would entail creating even more expensive new infrastructure and amenities. Officials in Beian were very sensitive to not over-burden the villagers with new expenses.

Instead, efforts were being made by the county government to develop its rural towns, and especially to develop the township of G.H., where the county government is located, into the main urban, commercial, and industrial centre. The hope is that this will bring many of the county’s migrant workers back home and that people will (voluntarily) leave their overpopulated backward villages and move into the township’s new residential areas, some of which are still under construction. The plan, according to official documents, is that 80% of the county’s population will eventually reside in the county’s rural towns, with access to the towns’ facilities, infrastructure, and public amenities. Signs of change are already noticeable. According to officials, in 2007, only 10% of the county’s population held a non-rural household registration. Yet in the township of G.H., over 40% of the township’s population already hold a non-rural household registration. Under the circumstances of underdevelopment, the official view in Beian was clear – first comes “urbanisation from below,” and only then can the rural be urbanised.

Officials fully acknowledged that industrialisation and developing local labour markets may take a long time, as Anhui is not a highly industrialised province. Rather than constructing new residential communities, they have happily embraced the idea of less ambitiously focusing on enhancing “community services” with a goal of offering better urban-like public amenities and services in the villages.

Discussion and conclusions

When the official call to construct new rural communities was aired in 2006, Chenggu was already an economically developed county. Its labour market offered employment opportunities not only to its own inhabitants but also to many thousands of migrant workers, who were flowing into the county from all over the country. About a quarter of its population held non-rural hukou and about half of the county’s total population lived in the county’s rural towns, enjoying excellent infrastructure, public amenities, and markets. Public transport and an excellent road network had already been established interconnecting all rural towns and villages. Under these circumstances, villagers and officials welcomed constructing urban-like residential areas with modern facilities, accessible high-quality services, and better economic structure as a natural continuation of the county’s two decades of economic development.

While officials in Chenggu were excited about the construction of new rural communities, in less developed Beian County officials rejected the idea. To be sure, as in Chenggu, officials in Beian identified the impediments of the “old” countryside as a problem and strongly believed that a “new” countryside is needed. They did not reject the idea of constructing rural residential communities as embodying potential benefits, but they questioned whether it was appropriate for their current local conditions. Since Beian lags behind Chenggu in terms of economic development, its present worries coincide with Chenggu’s past ones. The official view in Beian is to promote prosperity in the county through further development of town local labour markets. As in Chenggu, officials in Beian value urbanisation to boost the local economy and modernisation – but in their view, under the county’s current circumstances, this should be a product of market forces much more than through direct state intervention. For them, it is not time to urbanise yet.

Provincial levels recognised the need for a prosperous rural base to successfully create new rural communities. In 2005, for example, on the eve of BNSC and before the Party officially aired the national call to construct rural communities, the province of Shandong published a document in which it articulated its main policies for the impending BNSC scheme. All counties were divided into three groups by their level of GDP. Counties that were included in the first group of highest GDP in the province (one of which was Chenggu) were expected to concentrate industries in industrial zones, to concentrate population in the counties’ and central townships’ seats, and to concentrate villagers into rural residential communities. Rural and urban systems were to be better integrated in terms of economy, infrastructure, employment, social welfare systems, and environment protection. Often this is met by locating residential communities adjacent to rural towns as de facto suburbs.

The province’s expectations for the third group of counties with the lowest GDP were significantly less demanding and more appropriate to their poor economic conditions. These included improving the physical living environment in the villages, improving villagers’ professional skills, improving basic infrastructure and amenities inside the villages, and improving village officials’ leadership. Unlike the developed counties, where the provincial focus was on integration between rural and urban communities, here the focus is on improving local conditions inside the villages, with the hope that with time they will be able to improve their conditions and meet the province’s requirements for its developed counties.

The cases of Chenggu and Beian, which fully coincide with Shandong’s schema, make it clear that while imposing urban models of residence may

be appropriate for developed rural areas, this does not fit local conditions elsewhere.

Migrant workers, for example, may refuse to buy new housing that they cannot use. In areas where agriculture is still a major source of household income, and in hilly or other areas where villages are extensively dispersed, concentrating the population in new residential compounds may invoke serious difficulties for those displaced. Even in developed Chenggu, where according to local statistics 70% of the villagers’ income is derived from non-agricultural resources, and where non-rural employment is highly available and accessible, villagers sometimes worried about storing agricultural tools or living removed from their land and livestock.

Moreover, construction of residential communities requires significant financial investment. According to a local document, by the end of 2009, total investment in the construction of rural communities in Chenggu already totalled a billion yuan. Clearly, it would have been impossible in most rural counties to meet the high standards of Chenggu, especially bearing in mind that most localities in China are heavily in debt.

What also serves as a serious concern is the embedded lack of transparency in the Chinese political system and the inability of higher levels to control implementers and to suppress corruption and embezzlement by local officials. This is worrisome, as the creation of new rural communities necessarily involves large-scale construction projects and land transfers, two main sources of local corruption in contemporary China. There already is evidence of local officials taking advantage of the call to construct new rural communities. This includes, among other things, illegal sale of villagers’ land, deprivation of villagers’ basic legal rights, inadequate compensation for loss of land or housing, forcing villagers into debt to buy new housing against their will, expelling villagers from their homes and in some cases placing them in provisional housing lacking basic facilities, and illegal shifts of property from villagers to companies in which local cadres or their kin have financial interests.

Lastly, as a statist venture, constructing rural communities may easily tilt towards meeting state goals much more than villagers’ well-being. Most villagers whom I conversed with in Chenggu made it very clear that no one has asked them whether they would like to leave their villages or to move to communities and to multi-storey apartment buildings. Indeed, it seems that villagers’ ability to influence local officials’ decision-making was slim. County construction bureau officials told me that geographical location was their main consideration in deciding which villages were to be concentrated into new communities and reside together. Whether the villagers agreed or not was clearly not their concern. In several communities, villagers said that their opinion was never asked regarding housing models or what was to be included in the community’s jurisdiction. In many aspects, grassroots officials’ discretion was also limited. It is not surprising that in both Chenggu and Beian, itemising what was to be included in the shaping of villages communities reveals many similarities, such as greenification, introducing sports facilities, e.g., basketball courts and outdoor facilities, etc. These were all articulated by the central government and by higher levels of the local state as a compulsory formula to establish a new countryside. In both counties, grassroots officials were provided with detailed lists from higher levels of the government itemising what is to be constructed, with little discretion left for the implementers. Excluding villagers from participating in decision-making and counting on urban wisdom to solve rural problems risks serious misunderstanding of local rural circumstances. The more rural, the greater the potential misapprehension.

Yet it seems that central policymakers are determined to expand the construction of rural communities and at a rapid pace. In October 2010, a national conference was held in Ningxia entitled “Obvious effects of the national experimental work in [the construction of] rural communities.” The ranks of the participants left no doubt about its importance. These included the Deputy Minister of Civil Affairs and leaders from every province and city. Senior officials praised experiments in constructing new rural communities at the conference. The Deputy Minister stressed the serious shortage of services in rural China, conveying a call to create rural communities in 30% of China’s counties by the end of 2011. The conference called for a gradual expansion of the construction of rural communities to “remote areas with poor natural conditions and transport,” located in “areas with poor economic conditions, forestry areas, pastoral areas, fishing areas, and other rural areas.” Although the word “gradually” was used, the schedule announced at the conference left no time for idling. By 2015, all rural areas in the country were expected to carry out the construction of new rural communities, with more than 60% of the communities basically constructed. By 2020, all rural communities nationwide are to be built, offering communal social life with orderly management and complete services.

A year later, a Ministry of Civil Affairs document referred to the rural communities as “guaranteeing that hundreds of millions of farmers enjoy the fruits of reform and development.” This expectation of a rapid nationwide construction of rural service communities is of great concern. As noted earlier, one of the main reasons for officials constructing urban-like dense residential communities was to improve the provision of services, which could not have been provided efficiently when the rural populace was scattered in the countryside. The earlier-mentioned demands of the Ministry of Civil Affairs that all services must be provided within a radius of no more than 2-3 kilometres and no more than 20 minutes’ walking distance serves as another driver of concentration regardless of local circumstances.

No doubt such clear messages by high-ranking figures do not fall on deaf ears. By 2011, most of the townships in Chenggu that I researched had already changed local regulations. Construction of any other style of housing apart from multi-storey buildings was officially banned. These included townships in which officials had explained to me only two years earlier that they would never impose any model of residence on the villagers, as this contradicts their own beliefs about what the new socialist countryside entails. Two years later the die had been cast – the rural scene is to be changed forever.

The construction of rural communities has become an ambitious nationwide policy that seeks to change China’s countryside dramatically through statist social engineering, relocating populations, and imposition of urban
settings on rural communities. The idea of imposing urban models on rural communities as an administrative means to solve rural problems is provocative. Merging villages is even more so. According to officials in Chenggu, after all of the villagers have been moved, the next step would be merging them politically and financially under a unified community leadership. As each village has its own economic resources and as some have been more successful than others, such a move would likely encounter bitter resistance. Some officials in Chenggu in a burst of candour admitted that thus far no one in the county had succeeded in resolving this impending problem.

As the cases of Chenggu and Beian clearly demonstrate, constructing rural residential communities fits prosperous communities’ circumstances. But as the policy gains popularity in the eyes of central officials, it raises real concerns for the future of most of China’s rural population. If handled wisely, it may benefit both villagers and the state. If not, it may easily become a statist venture of predation and a source of tension and rural discontent. How the program will affect China is still to be seen, and still for the state to decide.

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