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Anonymous Process and Absent Architect: Behind the Scenes of Chinese Rural Regeneration

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Alberto Pérez-Gómez noted that 'it is a modern belief that the architect can direct the builder's series of operations through working drawings or precise detail designs. In so doing, the architect is no longer involved in the making of a building with its builder.'¹ However, the boundary was even more blurred in the Chinese case beyond the Western binary oppositions of architect and builder.

Architect as a professional title was brought into modern China from the West as relatively recently as the early twentieth century. In pre-modern China the architects' role was fulfilled by master-builders, most of whom were carpenters. Therefore, neither the professional architect existed, nor the architect as a profession in the construction sector. Only those master-builders who conducted architectural activities in the building projects, and who somehow combined roles of modern architects, contractors and builders. The master-builders (we might refer to these also as 'carpenter-architects' in Chinese context) as the only technical and financial consultants to the clients took over the whole process of the building project, ranging from feasibility study, design development and delivery, to the management of time, cost, and construction quality on site. The notion of master-builder or carpenter-architect refers in Chinese as 'Da-jiang' or 'Dong-liang', who were less powerful and less visible in the process of conceiving or representing buildings than in mediating and making. Part of the reason for this invisibility was that longstanding social prejudice on builders and craftsmen in China. It was also partly because of the literati's indispensable involvement into a building project through visual and textual practice in the form of landscape paintings, calligraphies and poems. The traditional Chinese literati refer to the intellectuals ranging from local gentrymen, scholar elites to administrative scholar-officials, who all shared Confucian moral and ethical value. Some of the literati were themselves the end-users, owners of the building or the land; some of them approached the building (or building process) through social networks, or by coincidence, and they were deeply intrigued. For the literati, architecture was one of the key ideal subjects to be represented in drawings or writings, in order to reveal their personal cultivation and express their innermost hearts. Their representational forms of architecture tended to be free of styles and categorizations, valuing and prioritizing the spontaneous, the unheard, and the invisible process of the building and its subsequent spatial use. For the master-builders or carpenter-architects, architecture was as much a process of design and dissemination, as it was about a coherent application of an established order of modular system, ranging from the simple interlocking joint of a bracket supporting the roof, to the complicated archipelago of a city. Technically, this kind of adaptable architectural system has largely been known only to the carpenters' groups. However, through continuous representation from the literati groups, this architectural system had far-reaching social and cultural influences on collective memory and perception of the built environment in China. This particular process and practice of architecture was repetitively practiced by each group and handed down from one generation to another. The multiple authorships and relatively anonymous process of building a building were a consistent yet hidden mechanism behind the scenes of the built environment of Chinese villages accumulated through centuries.

However, the once common ground of architectural knowledge, production and reproduction, has been obscured in contemporary, urbanizing China. This is due to the changing modus operandi brought in by western architectural concepts and building methods. Their lineage, presence and continuation could be captured in some untouched corners of the rural villages, away from the restless urbanization and rural regeneration.² Bishan village (Figure 1) has one of the sites that survived. Originally named Huangpi, Bishan is a rural village sitting at the foot of Mount Huang at southern Anhui Province, China, with nearly 1500-years history and 3000 registered residents. Since 2011 the artist led proposal 'Bishan Commune'³ has proposed and tested, a series of cultural events and spatial programmes intended to revitalize the Bishan village from the 'bottom-up'. The previously ignored village has attracted interest at both local and international levels. It acts as an alternative model for rural regeneration in China. Controversially, Bishan village has been pushed from the 'backyard' as an ordinary Chinese rural village to the 'frontline' as a new benchmark in the name of Chinese rural regeneration. More and more professional designers and artists have been attracted or invited from the cities to this village for design visits, residence and new regeneration projects.

Within this international and local context, this essay shifts the focus away from regeneration, to look instead at an 'anonymous' carpenter as a villager-insider⁴ and the construction of his own house at the western part of Bishan village (Figure 2-7). The author was first introduced carpenter-architect in March 2015, and had opportunities to talk to him and his apprentice when staying at their busy construction sites. As one of the last few practising carpenters⁵ of that region, he had more than 50 years' experience in carpentry yet he didn't draw or write about architecture in a modern manner. This house was built for this carpenter's own family of four generations living together.⁶ Therefore the carpenter-architect combined the client, the user, and the master-builder. Design of the house started from identifying the challenge, from the Feng-shui issues of the site location and orientation, to the appropriate wood species and size of key structural components for this case. Understanding the basic needs of the family users evolved from early dialogues and making on site, which linked to the calculation of specific spatial requirements according to the carpenter's own practice experience. All the spatial design decisions were based on oral dialogue and negotiations, and needed to be transferred in the local dialect when sourcing locally. Working closely with several sub-contracted masons, and with constant voluntary support from the friends and neighbours of the village, the carpenter-architect never masked his strong motivation and responsibility during his daily dialogues to complete the construction of this building before the next Chinese Spring Festival (February 2016). Calendrical and life-cycle activities, such as employing spatial compositions as signifiers, are an important practice in Chinese traditional architecture and villages.⁷ Therefore it is not a surprise that the carpenter-architect finished the building in time. In achieving this goal, he not only completed the physical part of the building in time, but also established the spiritual connection between architecture and broader cosmos. Somewhat ironically this was the first piece he did for himself, but also somewhat sadly this was probably going to be the last piece in his career as a carpenter.

This essay records the prolific work of one of the limited number of traditional master-builders and carpenter-architects who are working in peripheral parts of rural villages far away from the urbanizing areas and who are often overlooked by external professionals. Their names are not anonymous to their communities (although they prefer to be and enjoy their longstanding status of 'anonymity' to the 'outsiders'); so are the techniques they use and the process they use to design-build. The process of building a building, particularly those specific building rituals (via performances, structural primer and decorations), remain a collective work-event involving the whole village through the strong tie of kinship and neighbourhood. Therefore, building a building is building the village community. Buildings, whether they are private homes or public halls, look much the same. They use the same materials, structural logic, and construction systems,

chosen to enhance daily life. Yet, they will differ in volume, layout, size, decoration as well as in spatial usage. (Figure 8) Thus the building can be understood as a mini-village; and the village is a mega-building. That consistent presentation of the village facilitates the coexistence of the personality of the individual (master-builder) and the collective (carpenter-architects and other involved villagers). The absence of the self (invisibility of the carpenter's role) facilitates the presentation of the village (represented by the literati) as a whole. This hidden mechanism has been repressed largely but still strikingly resilient in remote rural China obscured behind the scenes of the restless urbanization.

The rural vernacular in China holds extremely rich but hidden layers of Chinese built histories and cultures. That infrastructure of village architecture had been produced and reproduced through a whole series of culturally-specific concepts, consisting of the time and space, carpentry, the clan-community, the lineage, family, Ying-yang, Feng-shui, ancestral worship, calendrical cycles, and domestic rituals, etc. Architecture will become a more and more marginal profession in China during and after the breaking away from those layers, unless it re-values and re-invents the above-mentioned anonymous processes and absent architects developing the process and practice of architecture to a more 'advanced' level. This could provide an understanding of the historical concept of architect and architecture in traditional China. It could be possible to understand and use this concept in contemporary rural regeneration in China. This is both a methodological question of how the building process is documented in written and visual forms based on the oral instructions used by master-builders or carpenter-architects, and also a conceptual interrogation of the question who was the 'architect' and what was the concept of 'architect' in traditional China. This could lead towards a deeper debate about how architecture and villages should evolve at both building and territorial scales.

To conclude, this essay attempts to alter those pre-established, 'proper' ways of seeing neo-vernacular architecture in contemporary rural China, particularly the much-focused and debated Chinese rural regeneration. Through constructing an intermediate middle ground between a conventional photo-essay and narrative texts, and using a mixture of digital montages, freehand mappings, oral transcripts and visual traces of the temporality registered in the building process, it also suggests a move away from a field-researcher as distant-observer to an literati-based, engaged practitioner – in this case, the author expanded the role of traditional literati in the production process and practice of the carpenter's own house as a piece of contemporary village architecture. This essay started from that ambition, or illusion at some points, to build a more complete picture not only about that piece of carpenter's own built, but also towards a form of anonymous architecture with multiple authorships which refers back to that hidden architectural system rooted in traditional Chinese villages. It is what left behind the scenes of hustle and bustle in contemporary Chinese rural regeneration and urbanization which fails/failed to be driven from the within.

List of Image Captions

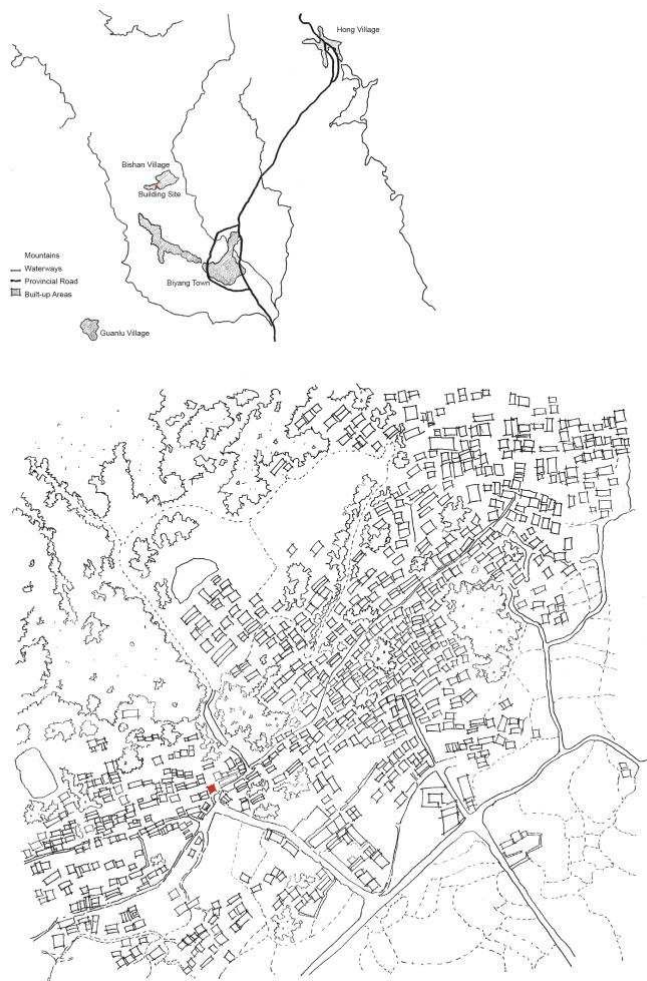


Figure 1. Mapping the village: regional connections (up); main part of village (bottom).



Figure 2. Street view of the carpenter's own house under construction, March 2015.



Figure 3. Almost a one-man-practice without any drawing: the carpenter sitting in the construction site of central hall (left); His ongoing beam work of mortise and tenon for upper bedrooms (right).



Figure 4. Working with the given site condition and available materials: new timber structure supports the existing loadbearing wall (left); new brick freestanding wall works with the existing wall (right).



Figure 5. Ritual marking as process of documentation and mediation on key structural elements: the text says 'New Land New Dwelling New Feature' (left); textual marking to promise safety and prosperity of the building and its users (right).



Figure 6. Street view of the carpenter's own house nearly construction, July 2016.



Figure 7. Street view of the carpenter's own house in use, August 2017.

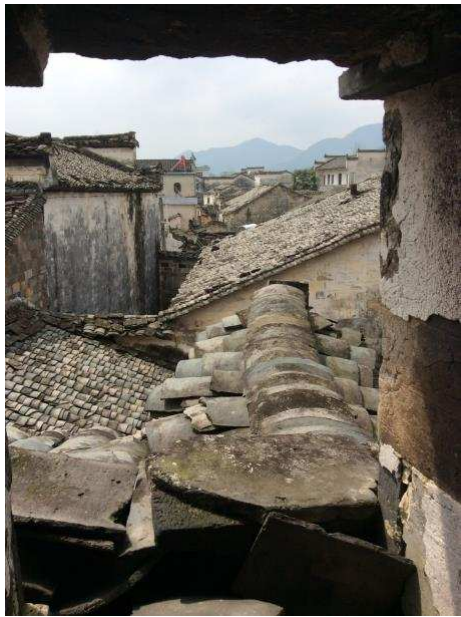


Figure 8. Part of the Bishan village-scape with analogous built structures from second floor.

Endnotes

¹ Alberto Pérez-Gómez, "Architecture as Drawing", *Journal of Architectural Education* 36, no. 2 (1982): 4.

² China has faced a new round of rural regeneration, after the governmental initiative 'Constructing a New Socialist Countryside' from 2005. The academia and profession of architecture in China have started to intensely engage with rural regeneration topics from around 2010 till now.

³ Xiang Ren, "Rural Face, Urban Mask: Architecture of Communal Form and Collective Practice in Two Chinese Villages from 2010 to 2015", *Architecture and Culture*, 5 (2017): 57-76.

⁴ This carpenter enjoyed, and required to be called as ‘mentor’ (‘Shifu’) instead of his real name, both during and after the interviews and dialogues with the author from March 2015.

⁵ In a conversation on the construction site in March 2015, the only apprentice of this carpenter honestly expressed his willing and decision to leave Bishan village for a better-paid job in the nearby town from the next year, with the carpenter’s unconditional agreement and support.

⁶ The carpenter also showed both interests and hesitations for the potential to open several rooms on the lower floors of this house as guest hostels in order to add one more income stream for the family. Before the summer of 2017, the house changed its door tablet from a normal family house to a hostel called ‘Leaning Mountain Dwelling’ (‘Yi Shan Ju Ke Zhan’).

⁷ Ronald G Knapp, “Chinese Villages as Didactic Texts,” in *Landscape, Culture, and Power in Chinese Society*, ed. Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley: Institute of East Asia Studies, 1998), 110-128.

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