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Rural Face, Urban Mask:

Architecture of Communal Form and Collective Practice in Two Chinese Villages from 2010 to 2015

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Abstract

'Rural reconstruction' has become an important and much discussed theme within Chinese architectural practice and academia in recent years. The approach adopted by architects and intellectuals in this field tends to be oriented to humanitarian service and cultural production. In this study I argue that not enough attention is being given to the kind of social production and communal form that is typically constructed through collective building and economic practices in Chinese villages.

This paper compares the approaches to village re-vitalization taken by two recent architectural projects in two Chinese villages. Both projects attempt to give fresh meaning to the old word 'Commune'. By examining the extent to which input from creative outsiders can reconfirm or re-invent the value and potential of 'commune' in their efforts to effect socio-cultural transformation in Chinese villages, this paper concludes that architecture in Chinese villages needs to work with more communal forms of collective practice in order to achieve a more socially resilient rural re-construction.

Introduction

China's expanding cities have given a major, but relatively recent impetus to global urbanisation. But for much of the twentieth century China's modern social and political history was actually more focused on rural village revitalization. The first wave of the 'Rural Reconstruction Movement' came during the 1920's and 30s and was led by a whole generation of intellectuals, which included key figures such as Shuming Liang and Yangchu Yan (James Yen), whose education-based, people-centred development strategies aimed to combat problems of Chinese rural village life, such as poverty, poor education and poor local governance [1]. The methods they developed did not save China from poverty or war, but they did provide the foundation for a bottom-up rural construction through the

education of common villagers which had great impact and left a profound legacy. For many years after this China was very concerned with the issues of villages, people and agriculture. But then after the 'Reform and Opening-up Policy' of 1978, China embarked upon its programme of rapid urbanization in which the city become the driving engine of both short term and long term national economic growth, which resulted in a very uneven pattern of urban and rural development: Millions of villagers flooded into the cities to work as low-skilled workers, with or without urban residential cards (within the country's 'Hukou' household registration system) leaving rural villages very short of skilled and educated workers. This is the backdrop for the latest wave of 'New Rural Reconstruction' which began around the year 2000, initiated by a number of social activists and academic scholars who were given some official license by the launch of the governmental policy 'Construction of a New Socialist Countryside' in 2005 [2].

Apart from research on settlements which had been designated as places of important cultural heritage, Chinese architectural practitioners and academics had generally been slow, or reluctant to respond to this drastic social transformation until around the year 2014, when the idea of 'rural reconstruction' filtered into mainstream consciousness.

The prevailing top-down modes of production in China and the lack of connections between theoretical and 'in the field' design practice have created tensions within architectural practice and academia between village and city, conservation and development, and tradition and modernity. It is worth mentioning that about a decade earlier than in mainland China, some independent practitioners and academic researchers from Hong Kong and Taiwan had already pioneered responses to these kinds of dilemmas. Among these are Atelier-3/Rural Architecture Studio led by Hsieh Ying-chun, 'Wu Zhi Qiao (Bridge to China) 'Charitable Foundation led by NG Yan Yung Edward [3] from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the emerging practice of Rural Urban Framework (founded by Joshua Bolchover and John Lin from the University of Hong Kong), and the innovative 'New-Bud' [4] architectural system from Zhu Jingxiang Architects also based in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Most of these practitioners were trained in the West before practicing in southern Chinese villages that are reasonably close to Hong Kong. But villages in the inner mainland which have suffered heavily from urbanization, have received less attention. Wang Shu made a breakthrough with his design research on remote villages in southeast China, in particular with his ongoing project to revitalize Wen village in Zhejiang province (interestingly many of his completed works in urban settings have absorbed lessons from vernacular village forms). All these examples of architectural practice in Chinese village contexts were directed by professional architects in a relatively 'top-down' approach towards humanitarian service and cultural production at both building and neighbourhood scale. But, it is argued, more projects that are less hierarchical in their social production of architecture are needed in order to empower ordinary communities and peasants in Chinese rural villages.

This is mainly because the social, physical, and spiritual production of Chinese village architecture has historically emerged from the collective engagement of processes of social production that engage with multiple narratives and authors, including scholars, carpenters, and a wide population of kin and neighbours. Quite a different process to those oriented

around the notion of the modern professional architect. Architectural design in the Chinese village was a layered, palimpsest-like process based on communal values and oral agreements. Another reason why architecture in the Chinese village is traditionally, physically and mentally a place of collective practice is because they have strong lineages and neighbourhoods with deep cosmological, Daoist and Confucian roots, formed over many generations, particularly in Southern and Central regions, where collective practice is also manifested in such things as protection for peace, mutual aid at harvest times, and in the extent to which village land is collectively owned. So even before the Communist Party/state's gradual collectivization of rural Chinese life particularly in land ownership and distribution, down-to-earth collective practices were a reality.

The architecture of the traditional Chinese village corresponds with recent Western thinking about architecture as a matter of concern and care, as opposed to regarding architecture as a matter of object and fact. Bruno Latour, for example, has argued that as matters of fact buildings can be subjected to rules and methods and they can be treated as objects on their own terms, but as matters of concern, they enter into more socially embedded networks, in which the consequences of architecture are of much more significance than the objects of architecture.[5] In sum, the paradigm followed by Chinese village architecture was rooted in a society of collective ownership and loose-fit local governance, and sustained by processes of social production in communal form and collective practice.

This paper considers two new architectural projects in two old villages in mainland China which have re-invented the idea of the 'Commune', a word with very strong associations with the era of the People's Commune (1958-1978). The two villages lie between the highly developed eastern coastal regions and the underdeveloped west central western regions, in the eastern central part of China in Anhui province and Zhejiang provinces respectively. My interest in vernacular architecture in these areas began partly with personal curiosity connected to my own family's origins in Zhejiang province and their move to Anhui province during the People's Commune period. But then I also became interested in the critical and creative approaches to these traditional contexts being developed by architects within the context of current rural-urban transitions and conditions. The two projects are; 'Bishan Commune' in Bishan village to the southeast of Anhui province, and; 'Sun Commune' in Shuangmiao village in the southwest of Zhejiang province. I have made fieldtrips to both these places and conducted more than 40 formal and informal interviews with these project's stakeholders, ranging from the head of the village, to architectural assistants and ordinary villagers whose views I paid particular attention to. I also conducted interviews with several local experts, including rural sociologists, anthropologists and editors, in order to gain as broad a range of viewpoints about these two case studies as possible. The intention I had was neither to criticize emerging practices nor to be nostalgic about the old ways, but rather to explore the values and challenges of communal form and collective practice in Chinese villages for contemporary architectural practice. Two approaches to 'Commune', with contrasting values are considered here; one is the commune imagined and presented by creative outsiders, and the other is the commune as expressed and lived by villagers themselves. Although not mentioned by the practitioners involved in these projects, their different approaches seem to accord in some senses a dialectical relationship with theories of, on one hand, Richard Florida's ideas of the 'creative class'[6], albeit in a rural

Chinese context, and on the other hand, Bruno Latour's notion of 're-assembling the social' already referred to above. This paper seeks clarity about how architecture as a communal form and collective practice could facilitate village revitalization within the current wave of rural reconstruction in China.

CASE STUDIES

'Bishan Commune' (2011-), Bishan Village, Anhui Province.

Bishan Village in Anhui Province has a registered population of 3000 inhabitants. Two-thirds of these villagers live and work outside the village in small businesses such as handicrafts and tea trading. [7] The average annual income in 2013 was around £1200 per person, which represents a good level of economic status when compared with other, often poorer villages in that region. However, that figure does not provide a complete economic picture, particularly if one considers the other third of the population who actually live in the village. Most of these permanent residents are those left behind for various reasons, including many elderly people, women and pre-school children, many of whom who get their incomes through the farming of crops such as silk, tea and rape-seed, or from casual labour, as a brick porter for example, or in nearby rural factories. Although many maintain small vegetable plots for their own consumption, most people living in Bishan do not work on the larger farmlands, this is because they can actually earn a bit more by subcontracting the work to food corporations under government supervision, a peculiar economic condition that presently exists in many Chinese villages.

Historically, Bishan was one of the most affluent and important villages of the region because of its proximity (around 4 km) to the nearby county. But in the past two decades much of its architectural heritage has been lost, as villagers have tended to knock down their old family houses in order to build modern ones like those in the city. For example, out of 38 ancestral halls and family halls that existed until recently, only 10 remain. [8] So Bishan's appearance has changed a lot, and as a result it has not been selected as a 'cultural tourism village' by the county government. [9] The consequences of this are that it does not receive governmental funding to develop its public facilities and infrastructure, because the county government only supports 'tourism villages' where there is greater potential for a return through taxation. Bishan, and many other villages like it, that have not been prioritised as tourist sites in the county's development agenda in recent years are in a negative cycle with increasing numbers of people leaving and old buildings being abandoned. If anything the traditional clan-based social structure has decayed faster than the buildings (Figure 1).

Practitioners: In 2007, internationally recognized Chinese artist and curator, Ning Ou, who originated from a South China rural village himself, established a 'village commune' in Bishan, which aimed to address the problems with a utopian vision. One of his key partners included his close friend and contemporary arts academic Jing Zuo. They investigated the physical and cultural landscapes of the village with their assistants and students many times over four years, before the final launch of the 'Commune' in June 2011. They re-appropriated the term 'commune' from the era of China's 'Great Leap Forward' which had

championed the idea of the 'People's Commune'. The use of the term, which re-awakened old 'red memories', was intended to evoke the ideas of collective work-life and spirit in the whole community, rather than the unrealistic economic ambitions that some associate with those times. By positioning themselves as both expert practitioners and ordinary residents of Bishan village, they aimed to explore an alternative model for rural development, to revitalize vernacular cultural identity, and to reconnect the ruptured social structure that had originally been based upon the traditional 'mutual aid' spirit of the clan system. [10]

Working process: Under the influence of 'non-governmental' forms and practices as exemplified by places like Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen, the main vision of this Commune was to establish open-ended, self-sufficient and self-organised systems governing the village's appearance, co-housing provision, food production and media representations. It even had its own passport, uniform, and a time-based currency called 'Bishan Hours' (Figure 2) which could replace cash. It aimed to share public facilities such as a kitchen and laundry to save collective expense. The aim was also to share opinions and to make collective decisions on commune policies. Overall they valued and advocated a very pure kind of civic spirit, manifested through collective place-making and decision-making, which they believed was necessary to weave Chinese vernacular settlements and communities back together.

The starting point of the Bishan Commune was the regeneration of a disused ancestral hall (Figure 3) and the reintroduction of a ritual performance based on the themes of harvest and craftsmanship. A performance-based exhibition called 'Bishan Harvestival' took place in August 2011, with the help of funding by city based galleries and biennials, accessed through Ning Ou and Jing Zuo's standing in the social networks of a cultural elite. Then another hall was re-programmed as a branch of a national bookstore chain, which in this case was given generous support from local government, which allowed them to rent the place free for the next 50 years.[11] A collective farm producing organic food was also established. In terms of design and construction, it was Ning Ou who provided the initial concepts and drawings which were further developed with the help of friends and student assistants with architectural skills and then they hired local builders.[12] Many discussions, disagreements and adjustments happened on the building sites.

How it works: The first and only Bishan Harvestival took place over three days in a reclaimed hall at the entrance of the village (Figure 4) and successfully reconnected civic life through a reinterpretation of this old but forgotten communal ritual space. The event comprised an exhibition on village history, a symposium on building conservation and rehabilitation, some local music and performances, and a documentary film connected with a book launch which focused on 34 indigenous crafts given contemporary collaborative reinventions. Initially the bookstore worked well, it saved the ancestral hall from demolition and introduced a new civic learning space in an old building previously used for collective worship. Villagers came in and out who might not be reading but who wanted social contact. Other visitors were travellers who saw this bookstore as a travel destination and as a place to meet villagers, so it fulfilled its hoped for cross-programming potential. Ning Ou created his own live-work space, carefully arranged by him and his assistants with modern

elements of structure and furniture inserted into the old fabric of a traditional building. Other recent projects included a small exhibition hall which was transformed from existing buildings.

The practitioners claimed that those diverse events and interventions were co-organised with villagers combining efforts from both insiders and outsiders including artists, architects, musicians, film-makers and student volunteers. But questions remain about how much participation there was from locals and to what extent they benefited from their engagement with this cultural festival. Other questions of everyday participation was also raised by the modern bookstore behind the traditional mask of the ancestral hall: The store sells very expensive literary and art books and calls itself by the French name of 'Librairie Avant-Garde'. Such cultural and economic thresholds exclude many locals, and cater for those of a higher socio-economic status who wish to be associated the shop's appealing aesthetic and narrative. Its main target group is not ordinary villagers who tend not to be well-educated, but middle-class visitors from large cities such as Nanjing and Hangzhou. The lack of more daily interaction and consensus between the arts practitioners and local villagers is evident in interviews made with several of the villagers, including some of the village leaders. Most of them recognise that the 'Bishan Commune' has made the village 'more famous than before', however they also insist that the whole proposal functioned in a way that they thought was quite remote from their wellbeing and everyday lives.[13] Some also expressed a preference for 'tourism developed by commercial companies', because it could improve their economic condition in a real sense and probably in a much shorter timeframe. To what extent the project connected with the real public interests of underprivileged villagers is an important question.

'Bishan Commune' considered: Although situated in Bishan Village, the 'Bishan Commune' seems to have remained 'other', as it developed from a utopian cohousing experiment to a heterogeneous grafting of the urban onto the rural. The tactical error of this utopian proposal aiming for rural revitalisation, arguably, lay in the uneven development strategy which prioritised cultural production over the social production of community and architecture. The cultural revitalisation achieved by the 'Bishan Commune' for the village relied largely on curiosity and nostalgia on the part of urban visitors and their consumption of the place. The project has had positive local policy benefits, particularly with respect to building regeneration and heritage preservation, but this was based on local government intentions to increase tourism income by exploiting the personal aura of Ning Ou and the publicity generated by his radical intentions. The fact is that almost all the flows of people and material to this Commune depended on a linear track from urban to rural and it appears more successful in terms of cultural production for outsiders and less so in terms of social production for villagers. Ultimately the 'Bishan Commune' has not fulfilled its aim of tackling the fundamental question of how to empower the weakest from the bottom up along the chain of spatial and material allocation in this rural village, whilst retaining its own self-generated identity. In general then, the 'Bishan Commune' has raised more questions than provided answers and for the past four years the creators of the 'Bishan Commune' have had numerous arguments and misunderstandings as they faced the village's challenges. But it nevertheless represents an important milestone in understanding the

challenge of intervening in rural contexts. It has stimulated hot debates and discussions, and has gained a lot of attention from wider audiences, which will it is hoped will help to attract further funding, labour and material resource for other projects. The Bishan Commune's dependence on cultural production did not focus enough on some of the socio economic issues underlying the village's physical appearance and hasn't yet guided this old village onto a more participatory and resilient path. It was ambitious to start the project with the vision of a collective commune, but social division is still very evident, between arts practitioners as part of an urban elite and indigenous villagers as an underprivileged rural class, and between the aesthetic imagination of the privileged and the real life of the poor. If it couldn't engage local policies and strategies with a more explicit socio-spatial focus, then it could neither exert a more profound impact on local community empowerment and village development.

'Sun Commune' (2013-) Shuangmiao village, Zhejiang Province.

Village:

Shuangmiao administrative village is one of 29 villages supervised by a township called Sun. This administrative village is made up of three separate villages – Shuangmiao, Zhuyi and Guanyin village, with a total population of 1400 from 477 families. It is located at the western foot of Tianmu Mountain, 5 km from the Sun Township near Lin'an City which is to the west of the capital city of Zhejiang province, Hangzhou city. In recent history the administrative regional development of Sun township has, like most rural settlements in the time of the People's Republic of China, been through many changes: Designated as a 'small town' between 1950 and1956, its status was then changed into the 'Sun People's Commune' in 1958. In 1982 it was divided into three communes, then reformed into a small town again in 1984 and finally upgraded into a township from between 1988 and 1992. [14] Located in a sub-tropical region with four clearly distinguished seasons, Shuangmiao administrative village is an agricultural-based village with cultivated arable land accounting for over 90% of its economy. Income-Related subsidies have been from three parts: bamboo shoots, silkworm breeding and seedling cultivation. This generally applies to the smaller Shuangmiao village which comprises approximately 300 villagers belonging to 90 families. Shuangmiao village is slightly different to the other two villages within the Shuangmiao trio because it has a particular focus on pig farming. In 2000 the proportion of villagers living off pig rearing peaked at 90% with each person raising an average of 90 pigs. Through this the villagers had a slightly higher annual income than average for the whole Sun Township (£870). But the market for pig rearing was limited to the local area because of poor traffic infrastructure. More and more of Shuangmiao's working labour have left to find work in nearby small towns and townships, causing a steady year by year deterioration of the village.

Practitioners and Financing:

This situation gradually improved after the arrival, in 2013 of a young organic agriculture enterprise, set up by Shanghai businessman Wei Chen. They nicknamed themselves 'Sun

Commune' in memory of the collective spirit and life in the old People's Commune days (in the period 1958-78). The ambition and vision for 'Sun Commune' was to achieve sustainable rural-urban relations where the rural will be in harmony with the urban through mutual learning and collective production. Founding partner Wei Chen claimed in an interview, that the original ethos of 'Sun Commune' was to provide a platform and a place for urban citizens to experience rural farming culture and products, where they could get close to nature and life in the countryside[15]. The existence of 'Sun Commune' reflects a low level of trust among the Chinese public in recent years on issues of food safety and security.[16] Raising pigs and growing vegetables to high organic standards in a traditional landscape attracted many citizens from Lin'an and Hangzhou cities. 300 of them have registered to become members of 'Sun Commune' as of 2015. Each member of 'Sun Commune' has to contribute £2500 per year in exchange for a weekly package that includes 5 kilos of rice, 3 kilos of pork, 10 kilos of vegetables and a bag of eggs. And they also receive two chickens or ducks on a monthly basis in the deal[17]. Using part of this collective funding, 'Sun Commune' now rents an area of 333 km^2 in the Shuangmiao village vicinity. And it employs 20 plus villagers, all of whom were experienced farmers aged over 50. Some of them are directly employed, while others work as sub-contractors. One villager explained his surprise when Sun Commune bought rice from his paddy fields in 2013 at over twice the average price of the township market[18]. Architect Haoru Chen was first invited by Wei Chen to act as a consultant for site selection, then to produce strategic plans and finally to become lead designer for the 'commune'. Trained in New York, Chen is an American-Chinese architect who teaches as an associate professor in the School of Architecture at the Chinese Academy of Art in Hangzhou city where he also maintains his own small practice. The Sun Commune was his first Chinese project. The head of the Chinese Academy of Arts school of architecture is internationally acclaimed architect Wang Shu, with whom Haoru Chen shares a common interest in the rural vernacular. Chen spent three years in the field researching farm houses in Chinese rural villages, an experience that taught him their local importance, their levels of self-sufficiency and their relationships with organic life cycles and micro-ecology.

Planning process:

Shuangmiao's cheap land rent, mild and humid climate and its isolation from other farming zones where pesticide and fertilizer were heavily used, determined its choice as the site of the 'Sun Commune' after 6 months' investigation by Haoru Chen and his assistants. It was located in a long and narrow valley some 3600 metres long, with only one access road for transport. As well as farmland for different crops, a series of other agricultural projects including a pig barn, a hen barn, and a goat valley were also strategically planned, with the pig barn containing 100 pigs to act as a pilot project. Chen identified a specific site for this pig barn in virgin land alongside a small river in the deepest part of the valley. This site is some distance from Shuangmiao village and other human facilities, such as the irrigation water tanks scatted around the central spine of the 'Sun Commune'. Following studies of the habits of pig groups, and advanced pig farm management techniques, the 380m^2 site was subdivided into pig activity zones including resting and eating and an outside swimming

pool for about 100 pigs. The intention was not only to facilitate the daily routines of pigs but also to have minimal impact on the existing wilderness.

Design process:

The next key parameter was the construction material for this temporary shelter which had a very low budget and a tight schedule. Although it could be prefabricated in nearby towns, with light-weight industrial materials, transportation costs for such a scheme would have been high. Instead, the abundant bamboo and thatch growing on the valley slopes seemed perfect; it was free, climatically adaptable, easily disassembled and bio degradable. The local thatch was tough and could grow as high as a person, in Shuangmiao's vernacular architecture it was commonly weaved to create a water-proof roof, bamboo too was widely used; for making supporting frames and screen walls. But traditional skills and methods for working with thatch and bamboo had been disappearing, as is the case in almost every rural village in China. Those specific skills and tacit forms of knowledge were vital not only for the building's construction, but for its maintenance too. Haoru Chen recognised that searching for, learning from, and working with local carpenters and other craftsmen was the only way to utilise these methods and sustain such knowledge. By chance, a bamboo craftsman called Shuqing Luo was found through an elderly villager's recommendation; as the third generation of a family of bamboo craftsmen in Shuangmiao village, Luo, along with his two brothers, had abandoned bamboo construction for a better life many years earlier[19]. The team persuaded him to return, just for this project, to work as a consultant at the schematic design stage and as foreman to the on-site construction team. With his experience and input, appropriate and site specific winter bamboo was cut, processed, and seasoned away from insects, sunlight and rainwater, to make it durable enough for the shelter's expected 5 years of use. The roof thatching was conducted under the guidance of elderly villagers, from whom the team learnt how to recognize, collect and weave local thatch into breathable roof panels. The foundations which were supposed to touch the land as lightly as possible were made with stones from the nearby river combined with rammed earth from the site.

Learning about the performance and tectonic properties of bamboo and thatch gave Haoru Chen and his team the confidence to develop a multi-faceted, triangulated architectural system for the pig barn. Four triangular structural units, each 8 metres wide by 8 metres long and 4 metres high, created four voids through which plenty of cross-ventilation could occur. This was partly necessary because the humidity generated from both outside humidity and the pigs inside could easily affect the structural performance of the bamboo and thatch. All bamboo components with a diameter more than 15 centimetres were interconnected to form a diagonal lattice, which functioned as the major frame to support the continuous folded roof's thatch panels (Figure 5). The deep overhang of the thatched roof provided shaded the pigs, as well as the inner bamboo frame from the sun. To anchor the bamboo frame, it was attached to ten load-bearing pads made of rubble, each pad had a width of 1 metre and a height of 1.2 metres. This technique would not only preserve the existing ground soil but also allow for more ventilation from ground. These helped create the central corridor along the east-west axis which was used for the farmer to feed the pigs on each side. With its filtered light and shadow, the geometry of its structure and its linear

ground plan, this pig barn has an unexpected sense of place and ritualized movement and interaction between people and animals, and artefact and the nature along its main axis (Figure 6).

Collective construction:

After the schematic CAD visualisations, there were no more drawings. The axonometric drawing clearly guided the overall structure and cladding construction approach, but it did not set out close up construction details. Detail development was left to adjustments, negotiations and even 'happy accidents' on site. The construction was a collective practice both in terms of design and build (Figure 7). The architect and the craftsman both supervised and worked on site, the primary frame was made in a week by a team that included craftsmen, architects, students and village volunteers. All the thatched roof panels were handmade by villagers during their free time after farming.

Rainwater control was critical to the life span and performance of both bamboo frame and thatch roof, but this was tackled on site in vernacular fashion (Figure 8). The overlapping of each thatched roof panel carefully considered their slight differentiations in weave pattern, and organised them in a way that the stream of rainwater could run along the rod of each reed into bamboo drainpipes, this was achieved without a modern waterproof layer. Such an impermeable airtight layer would have caused the thatch to rot, meaning that it would have to be replaced or added to annually. Consciously or unconsciously, one of the village's vernacular building traditions was reinvented. The building would never be completed, instead, it was in a constant process of building and rebuilding; it became an assemblage of time, labour, skill and knowledge.

Social impact:

The barn was well received by its main users; one hundred pigs. They lived in comfort and would finally satisfy the demand of the members of 'Sun Commune' from the city, for well reared pork. The pig barn was managed full time since 2013 by a villager with the surname of Yang for which he earnt £3600 [21] per annum, about 4 times the average annual income in the Sun Township. Based on such data, one can assume that the profits generated by the whole 'Sun Commune' are probably quite considerable, although more complete data is not accessible because of commercial confidentiality. In contrast to perceptions of pig barns as dirty animal factories, this simple, carefully made shelter played a transformative economic, ecological and social role for Shuangmiao. The publicity it received created a lot of 'brand identity' for the 'Sun Commune', Shuangmiao village, the adjacent Zhu yiwu village, and even for the whole Sun township and Lin'an city. It was shortlisted and videoed as 'the most beautiful pig barn in China', widely published through open-accessed online platforms, and has attracted numerous tourists interested in architecture and organic agriculture. Following the success of the barn, local people from Shuangmiao and other villages nearby were eager to participate and work on subsequent Sun Commune projects[22]. Urban members of the Commune were also interested in engaging more: some spent weekends visiting the new and old sites of the Commune and working with rural villagers in busy periods such as seeding and harvest, in response to invitation emails from the founding

partners. One of the key architectural institutions in China, the School of Architecture of Southeast University, was attracted too, and they participated in constructing barns for chickens and ducks. A summer school there was led by the dean for a group of M.Arch students and coordinated by Haoru Chen in the summer of 2015. And the 'Sun Commune' even became an off-campus base for this prestigious school which intends to host regular academic teaching events there. More local economies could be nurtured in this way, either directly or indirectly.

'Sun Commune' considered:

The pig barn was well designed and planned, socially-engaged in its building, and productive in use. The sustainable treatment to the site and structure, the beautifully articulated geometry and proportions, and the roughness of the natural materials, all led the building from being a regular agricultural shelter, to a piece of architecture embedded in vernacular tradition and craftsmanship. Although the design drawings indicate that this was initially designed by an architect, the design development and building process was a collaborative and communal process that suited the collective ethos of the Commune. The shelter was only built to last 5 years, but the question is whether the meanings, values and re-invigorated site specific local knowledge it generated could trigger more sustainable developments throughout the whole region. The fact is that the Commune and its architectural interventions so far haven't been generated from within the local indigenous community. The pig, chicken and duck barns are all 'local strangers'.

The barn and the Sun Commune created a win-win modus operandi for urban-rural exchange: urban citizens input capital in exchange for conscientiously farmed local food, and rural villagers market their produce more sustainably and profitably than before. More local employment is likely to be generated as a result of the positive publicity generated for the Commune and the village, in commercial tourism, academic teaching as well as agriculture and food distribution; but who should be benefiting the most? Ethically the villagers should have their fair share, but the realistic outcome is that their village will be consumed by the urban Commune members as a site for capital investment and a weekend destination.

Concluding Thoughts

At a time when China has been undergoing an enormous rural to urban transition, numerous Chinese architects, artists and academics have tried to bridge the gap that has grown between their profession and rural vernacular culture. Within the setting of the village, the social production of architecture is of paramount importance. This is because architecture has historically not only been the symbol, but actually the embodiment of family politics, ancestry and clan culture in Chinese rural villages. It is not only about place-making, but also about identity-making. As Kim Dovey puts it; 'Places symbolize socially constructed identities and differences – of peoples, cultures, institutions and nations. The politics of identity and difference is mediated in an arena of spatial representations and the inertia of buildings can fix identity over time.' [23] Furthermore, in Chinese villages the

building process was a social process; family members and neighbourhood villagers participated in this collective event as communal ritual and according to specific times in the calendar and through this elevated building into architecture. At the same time, ordinary members of the local community were empowered to make places for people, in the space between the maker and the user and progressively diminishing thresholds between the self and the other. The sense of the architecture of communal form and collective practice, both in terms of its transformative process and its never-finished product, had been acting as a social glue to unite the village community.

Although such socially-engaged traditions and communal rituals in the production of village architecture has been almost completely destroyed by hegemonic urbanization and broader socio-political changes, such as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), in the past few decades, the two projects described and discussed here show how architecture, initiated by creative outsiders and co-produced by local people show that it is still possible to negotiate this change in a more communal form and through more collective practice than is usual today. They also reveal difficult ethical challenges, and questions of ecological and social sustainability through their development practices that emerge because of the uneven social statuses of architect and villager. Both Sun and Bishan communes were started with idealistic visions for their specific social, cultural and site contexts. They rejected demolition and instead tried to recycle buildings, reinvigorate local skills and knowledge and progressively transform their villages in inclusive ways. But how much participation was there? As the two cases studies show, there are different degrees and approaches to community participation in such projects. In the Bishan Commune, the initial social investment and enthusiasm was achieved though collaborative working and documentation of the craftsmanship and its representation festival, but following this early phase, the creative, participative interplay between the curator, artist and architect on one hand, and long term villagers on the other, proved not to be sustainable at the initial levels of interaction. In the Sun Commune, participants shared their almost forgotten local architectural skills and knowledge with the so called ‘expert’ outsiders, and a greater sense of ownership resulted. It developed a way to revitalise traditional local architectural knowledge and gave it renewed value to the village. However the commune was still framed for consumption by an urban middle class, and so how long that sense of communal belonging lasts in indigenous villagers’ hearts remains a question worth asking, as are those of who owns, who controls and who benefits most from the commune. Further contextual analysis is needed to further understand the longer term effects these two village communes have had on their respective communities. Despite limitations in their attempts to build individual and collective inclusiveness and accessibility through the construction of their respective spatial and material resources, they did achieve a range of communal exchanges. Within China’s hegemonic urbanisation, these attempts to form bottom up models of village re-vitalisation represent important breakthroughs from which others can learn.

On the evidence gathered thus far from studying these projects, one can read these projects in different ways. One could, for example, use them as a means to gauge the shortcomings of Richard Florida’s ‘creative class’ and cultural production as a force for regeneration, when

applied to Chinese village contexts where there has been a long and deep history of communality and self-determination. The success or failure of, on the other hand, a more careful reading, along the lines of Bruno Latour, of these projects/ places with complex social networks leads one to recognise the need to focus much more upon the transformative potential of architecture as a process of social production in these contexts. It is at this level that architecture might play a role in developing communal resilience in Chinese Villages.

Notes

1 Charles Wishart Hayford, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990)

2 Interview with Xuefeng He by the author in 2015 in Wuhan city. Prof. Xuefeng He is an academic in Chinese rural issues and a founding figure of 'Central China Vernacular School'.

3 As well as the *'Wu Zhi Qiao'* (Bridge to China) series of projects started from 2005, NG Yan Yung Edward has also led several other rural projects such as the *'A School To Learn'* campaign from 2006 and *'One University One Village Project Initiative'* from 2014.

4 The 'New-Bud' building system was the research output of Prof. Jingxiang Zhu's project *'Types and Variations from New Bud Building System'* from 2012, and has been applied into practice in Shanghai and Sichuan Province since then. It is a lightweight building system designed for programmatic flexibility and rapid construction in remote areas with scarce resources.

5 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social – An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York, Oxford University Press. 2005). Also AHRC research project Spatial Agency website. http://www.spatialagency.net/ Accessed on March 30, 2013.

6 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life* (New York: Perseus Book Group. 2002).

7 Interview with Head of Bishan Village by the author in 2015 in Bishan Village.

8 Interview with villagers of Bishan Village by the author in 2015 in Bishan Village; and by his friend in 2016 in Bishan Village.

9 Yunfan Sun, *Note -- Three Year after Bishan Village Commune Proposal* (New York Times, Dec 15, 2014) http://cn.nytstyle.com/travel/20141215/t15bishan/zh-hant/ Accessed January 11, 2015

10 Ning Ou, *The Vision of Bishan-Commune* public blog: http://site.douban.com/185552/ accessed January 19, 2015

11 Interview by the author with villagers living near the new bookstore in 2015 in Bishan Village.

12 Interviewed with Site Feng, architectural assistant to Ning Ou, in Ning Ou's work-home by the author in 2015 in Bishan Village.

13 Interviewed with the Head of Bishan Village by the author in 2015 in Bishan Village.

14 Sun Township website. *'Sun Township.'* Accessed February 21, 2015 http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=colMXq8k2EDeoDqp-KL0_9ZSfMJansx442thCUUbFiUUBpJYpKBBlz0UWp3_kK1-v6yw4imbjrlsVsu-t5NS6bC7OmZaCsU73BVRNXAzo0i

15 Weixia Nie, *Developing Community Farming in Sun Commune Lin'an City, Waking Up Beautiful Countryside Dream for Metropolitan Members (Zhejiang Daily*, June 13, 2015). Accessed October 21, 2015.

16 There is much research on the emerging issue of food security in China, the author here drew from the following:

Anna Boermel, *Of Salty Strawberries and Insect Bites: Coping with Food Safety Scares in Urban China* from *'China's Health, Environment and Welfare'* Conference hosted in May 2016 by Oxford China Centre.

Xiaoqing Yin, *Typical Investigation of the Problem of Livestock Product Security Source and Its Solution.* in Zhao Xiao (ed.) *China Environment and Development Review: The Rural Eco-Environment of China* (Beijing and Reading, China Social Sciences Press and Paths International Ltd, 2016).

17 Weixia Nie, *ibid*

18 Weixia Nie, *ibid*

19 Haoru Chen, *Natural Reconstruction: Bamboo Design in Lin'an's Experimental Farming Commune* (Time+Architecture 04, 2014) 132-135.

20 Peter Blundell-Jones, *Hugo Haring and the Secret of Form* (Sheffield: A3 Times. 2001)

21 Weixia Nie, *ibid*

22 Interviews by author with villagers of the Sun Commune by the author in 2015 in Zhu yiwu village and Shuangmiao Village.

23 Kim Dovey, *Framing places: Mediating Power in Built Form*. London (New York Routledge 1999).

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Sun, Yunfan. 2014. “Note -- Three Year after Bishan Village Commune Proposal.” *The New York Times,* December 15, 2014. Available online: http://cn.nytstyle.com/travel/20141215/t15bishan/zh-hant/ (accessed January 11, 2015).

List of Image Captions

Figure 1. Bishan village, its rural characteristics are maintained for urban tourists, hence; 'rural face but urban mask'. An old ancestral hall was exposed after the clearing out of its neighbourhood buildings. Photograph by the author.

Figure 2. 10 minutes 'Bishan Hours', the time-bank-currency introduced by the Bishan Commune, which aimed to reconnect the traditional village spirit of 'mutual aid', which included the exchange of time and labour in everyday life. Whether the dissemination of this concept and the actual use of this currency were successful, is questionable. Source: Bishan Commune

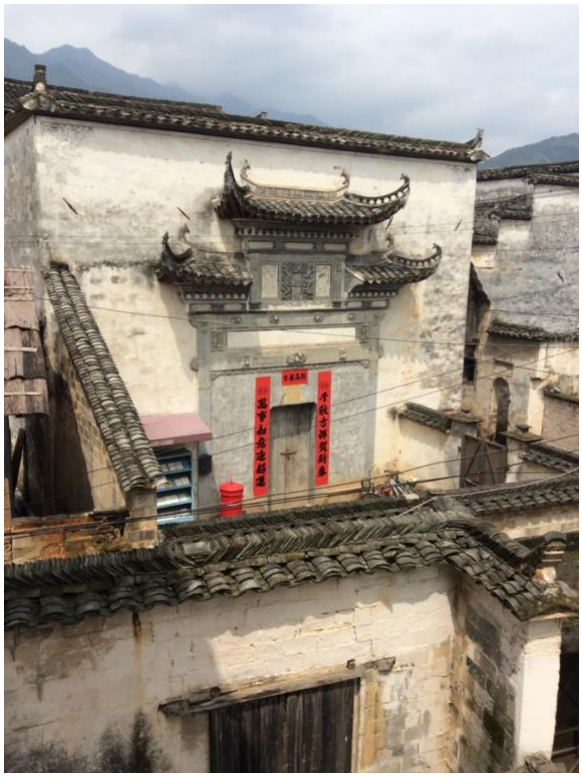

Figure 3. The abandoned ancestral hall chosen as the starting point of the Commune proposal. This building was given re-programmed as an avant-garde bookstore, part of a national wide chain owned by a friend of Ning Ou. Photograph by the author.

Figure 4. Another ancestral hall where the 'Bishan Havestival' took place in 2011. Since then It has remained disused. Photograph by the author.

Figure 5. The pig barn as seen from the adjacent field. Photograph by Wei Song.

Figure 6. Pig barn, internal corridor. Source: Sun Commune

Figure 7. Group photo of roof builders. Source: Sun Commune

Figure 8. Bamboo drainage pipes directing rainwater from the thatched roof to the ground via stone foundation pads. Source: Sun Commune