



## **From Countryside to City**

Chinese Architecture Now

Online discussion

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Comment by

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Back in the 1960s, Chairman Mao's Rustication campaign during the Cultural Revolution compelled Chinese students and graduates to leave their homes to be sent “up to the mountains and down to the countryside”, far away from their comfortable lives.

Tens of thousands of eager Red Guards – and many more frightened and coerced youngsters – were sent away to labour in the fields with the peasantry. It was partly a way of alleviating the lack of employment opportunities in cities as a result of failed economic programmes, but it was also strongly motivated by a belief that the simplicity of rural China would prevent urbanites from becoming too set in their bourgeois ways.

Fast forward to contemporary China's corpulent consumer society, and there is a different dynamic at play, one that encourages a new generation to re-engage with the countryside. Different methods, similar intent.

Every year, 14% of China's 1.4 billion population migrates from rural areas to the cities in search of a better life and a bit of economic and social action. As the Chinese economy boomed, many cities, especially those on the eastern seaboard grew exponentially. Shanghai swelled to 27 million; Beijing to 20 million with even higher populations when unofficial and illegal migration is accounted for.

A city like Shenzhen is a case in point; a sprawling collection of fishing communities of around 30,000 villagers in the 1980s. Forty years later, it is now a metropolis of around 18 million people, 11 million of whom are an unofficial floating population of migrants, unregistered workers, and those with temporary residency permissions. This swirl of humanity has created one of the most dynamic urban economies in the world, but also stirred up a sense of uncertainty and overcrowding.

Mental health issues among migrant labourers, often displaced by technology or younger workers, is a well-known urban problem. As importantly, there is a sense that the drive to urbanise has left many rural areas depopulated and depressed. In the last ten years, the government has been discouraging rural migration and trying to encourage people to stay in the countryside.

The situation in the migrants' hometowns has been the equal and opposite of the urban experience. Professor Wu Fulong suggests that left-behind villages require significant infrastructural improvements and that villagers have been ill-served by the urban experiment. Cities like Shenzhen have drained villages of their working-age generations, who travel from the countryside to find work, leaving rural China peopled by the elderly, frail, ill-educated and poor grandparents looking after toddlers.

As a result, there has developed a renewed focus on the well-being of villagers and seeking to provide opportunities and facilities within their villages to address population flight. It is a pragmatic policy to address the rural infrastructural deficit under the slogan of "common prosperity"; a kind of levelling up initiative with Chinese characteristics. It is intended to improve the lives of the poor, while cracking down on exploitative, multi-billion-dollar tech companies.

To this end, many new state-funded development projects are in the countryside with architects encouraged to protect, regenerate, and renew rural life. Architects are as likely to be found in remote settings, constructing small-scale vernacular homes and barn conversions, as providing high-rise masterplanning interventions in the city. For example, architect Chen Haoru is famed for his pig barn; Dong Mei, winner of the RA Dorfman Award in 2020, rebuilt a school damaged by the Sichuan earthquake; while SHUISHI architects recently created a low-cost village reconstruction.

All of these are bringing something back to the neglected areas of China's distant territories. Many architects – and their host communities – are rediscovering traditional techniques, such as bamboo and timber jointing, rammed earth and brick construction using naturally occurring materials and employing local people.

This is of course, part of a top-down mandate by the state to fulfil its desire to make the countryside appealing for returnees and to encourage people not to leave in the first place. At a time of COVID-19, global uncertainties, and economic stagnation it is also a time to encourage the patriotic essence of the noble peasant farmer, to laud the simple life and to encourage a sense of place and resilience.

China is still designing urban agglomerations, constructing towns, and building thousands of new buildings, so this is not to suggest that China has had a complete change of heart. It simply confirms that there are contradictory pressures acting upon it at this particular moment in its development. But reconstituting "the rural" is part of a political narrative of broader social engagement that might just help unify the nation and heal some of the rifts that developed over the years of hardnosed economic migration. That's the idea, at least.