A Critical Discussion on the Role of Architectural Practice in Development of Rural China: for Living Sustainably

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1. Living Sustainably in the Rural Context
1.1 Rurality (1): General concept

- Physical or emotional **characteristics** interpreted and reinterpreted by **people** living or working in the rural (Bosworth, Somerville 2013, Cloke 2003)

- **Guides** ruralites’ life, practice, and choice (Van Assche, Hornidge 2015)

- **Theoretical lenses** (Bryant, Pini 2010, p.4-5):
  - **Functional**: landscape, land use, identities of living on land
  - **Political-economy**: domestic and global networks
  - **Social constructionism**: identity of place including rural idyll and interconnection between rurality and nature

- **Features** (Cloke 2006, Harvey 1996, p. 322):
  - Materiality, representation, and imagination
1.1 Rurality (2): Rural space

- Location, space, and place (Bosworth, Somerville 2013, Cloke 2003)
  - **Location**: specific topographic positions
  - **Space**: human and non-human activities in a location
  - **Place**: identities and boundaries indicating the socio-cultural and environmental values

- A triad model: The three fold of rural space (Halfacree 2006, p.51):
  - **Rural localities** which are “inscribed through relatively distinctive spatial practices”.
  - **Formal representations** which frame rurality “within the (capitalist) production process”.
  - **Everyday lives of the rural** which “incorporates individual and social elements (‘culture’) in cognitive interpretation and negotiation”.
1.2 Rural Sustainability

• **Contextualisation** (Van Assche, Hornidge 2015): Specific development *path* and *place*

• **Knowledge** (Van Assche, Hornidge 2015): Both *local* and *expert*, share, learn, innovation

• **Bottom-up** (United Nations 2016): Adopting small changes in daily lives, available to *all*

• **A systems level** (Jacques 2014): *Institutions*: governance, resilience (ability to coordinate and modify)
  
  *Capital*: determines livelihoods and living style, comprises natural, physical, human, financial, and social capital (Ellis 2000)

  *Ecosystem services*: critical ecological goods and service for human life and society—provisioning, cultural, regulating, and supporting
1.3 Well-being

• **Goal** and evaluate **criterion** for improving rural livelihoods

• Theory of rural livelihoods (Jahan 2015)

  Diversification and access to capital and capital-based activities:
  Benefit **human development** individually, socially, and economically

• **Encompassment** (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005):

  Security, Basic material good for life, Health, Good social relations, Freedom

• Resilient approaches (Malik 2014):

  Universally basic social services, opportunities and capacity for **choice**
  Lifelong and cross-generation well-being
1.4 Ruralite-centred development

• Stakeholder should be prioritised:
  Permanent or the long-term rural residents, particularly the underclass, the vulnerable, and the marginalised population

• Why: Unfairly and unequally benefit from development:
  Unequal income distribution (Ribeiro, Marques 2002):
  Inclined to the rural middle-class and urban-rural migrants

Uncertainties:
Unstable sources of income, dependent on external investment, climate change and catastrophe, alienation between people and land (Vos, Meekes 1999), migration between rural and urban (He 2014)
1.5 Sustainable rural living

• **Context analysis:**
  Rurality and rural space

• **Paths of sustainability:**
  Institutions, capital, and ecosystem services

• **Means:**
  Resilience

• **Goal:**
  Ruralite-centred well-being

• **Objective:**
  Maintain basic social services, strengthen individual and community capability, and provide access and choice for achieving desired life.
1.6 The role of rural architectural practice in rural development

• **Scope:**
  Rural planning, rural landscape, physical infrastructure, built environment, etc.

• **Shape rurality:**
  Willingness of the locals to alter daily lives; Rural idyll from and interventions by the outside practitioners
  Manifests through the spatial changes and transformations of rural lives

• **Quality of architectural practice matters to quality of well-being:**
  Health, lifestyle, mental satisfaction, and functionality of the social and ecological system
2. Rural Development and Life in China
2.1 Rurality and rural change in China (1)

• Cultural origin:

Moderation and forbearance in rural daily lives showcase the villagers’ perception and pursuance of **humanity** (Village Diary 2013)

The shared social culture and the local storytelling indicate the sense of **belonging** through rurality and identity

• Change of the rural **social structure** since 1949:

From a society based on family and a differential mode of association (Fei 1992) to a society with disassembled traditional social institutions and association based on mutual interests or profits (He 2013)
2.1 Rurality and rural change in China (2)

• The migration between rural and urban since 1978:
  
The improvement of rural social welfare, the decline of urban employment decrease rural-urban migration (He 2014); and the emerge of rural idyll even lead to urban-rural migration.

• The Three Rural Issue in 1990s:
  
  Poverty, unguaranteed rights, dissatisfaction with rural livelihoods, instability of agriculture, and food insecurity

• Governmental response on Rural differentiation & stratification
  
  Rural governance reform, physical infrastructure construction, industrial development, urban-rural integration, exemption of agricultural tax, improve rural social welfare, targeted measures to help people lift themselves out of poverty
Rural China in change
2.2 The needs: Living sustainably in rural China

• Needs for sustainability:
  
  Increase **choices** on **means** and **directions** of rural development

  Guarantee **rights** and **social welfare** of rural residents

  Increase **capacity** and **confidence** of rural residents to grasp local
development: living sustainably to achieve ruralite-centred well-being

• Life to achieve well-being:

  A **decent** life (He 2014)

  An **endogenous** life (Woods 2011), with necessary adjustment on the paradigm

  **Open-source** knowledge and technology (Hsieh Ying-Chun 2015, Public Lab 2016, Wan et al., 2011)

  **Universally beneficial** development (Malik 2014)
3. Rural Architectural Practice in China
3.1 The rising architectural practice in rural China (1)

• Main objectives:
  To mitigate rural-urban disparity and to reinforce the rural idyll

• The government driving construction:
  The New Socialist Countryside since 2005; The traditional village preservation since 2012; The Beautiful Countryside Construction movement since 2013

Large-scale construction: Relocation, demolition, eviction

Emphasis: rural housing; sanitation, transportation, and communication infrastructure

Later advocacy: preservation of the localities, nostalgia, and ecosystem (regardless how effective the practical results are)

Physical infrastructure: important visible indicator of development/urbanisation
3.1 The rising architectural practice in rural China (2)

• The market driving construction:
  Decline of urbanisation and **saturated market of urban construction** (Hewitt 2016)
  **Permeation of market economy** in rural China
  Emergence of the **rural idyll**

• A crucial domain in rural development:
  **Proliferative** attention and interventions from the public, private, and third sector on rural construction
  Certain rural areas suffering excessive **commercialisation** while the less-favoured/remote/ordinary rural areas facing **marginalisation**
  Rural **middle-class** showing their affluence or the sop to urbanite through architectural practice
Conserved traditional village
Picture from: https://dimg03.ctrip.com/images/fd/tg/g3/M00/34/1B/CggYG1Yl0ZmAKGrDADZsWdibR2w801_C_350_230.jpg

Designed village
Picture from: http://www.guancha.cn/local/2017_01_10_388683.shtml

Designed village
Picture from: http://zj.zjol.com.cn/zj/510565.html

Modernised village
Picture from: http://tieba.baidu.com/p/1063665085

Industrial vs Vernacular
3.2 Problems in architectural practice in rural China

- Obliterated conventional livelihoods/lifestyle in new villages:
  
  **Re-establishment** of community (Liu et al., 2015) entails significant resources and time

  Adaptations of community engagement and organisation usually fail

- Inefficient use of new-built cottages:

  Main Causes:
  
  1. Oversized/inconvenient **spatial design** (Liu et al., 2015)
  2. Low **comfort level** of built environment
  3. Improper **land planning** primarily attributed to urban bias or unconformity of rural life
Problems in rural construction

- The New Socialist Countryside Construction in Nu River Valley
- Demonstrating houses for the Nu people who used to live in traditional log house
- Vacant village primary school building
- Rural garbage incinerator—Concerning rural pollution, but with weak maintenance and management
3.3 The latest top-down strategy of rural architecture practice China (1)
(China Architecture Design and Research Group 2016)

- Problems in current rural China development:
  1. **Economic** backwardness
  2. **Social** disintegration
  3. **Ecological** degradation
  4. Loss of **identity** and **locality**
  5. Fail to reach **consensus** between rural community, local government, and architect
  6. Convergence of **business model** (mainly refers to tourism and related services)
  7. Inadequate **transmission** of vernacular knowledge and tectonics
3.3 The latest top-down strategy of rural architecture practice China (2)
(China Architecture Design and Research Group 2016)

• A systematic strategy:
  • Based on investigation and experience of crucial projects in recent year
  • Externally supported architectural projects are not suitable to all types of rural areas
  • Sites must be carefully examined and selected
  • Emphasis:
    the market-oriented development supported by the external capital negotiations coordinated by local government
3.3 The latest top-down strategy of rural architecture practice China (3)
(China Architecture Design and Research Group 2016)

• Five stages under the strategy:
  1. Intensive and professional **investigation**
  2. Identity clarification and **planning initiation**
  3. Localisation of development and spatial planning by **targeting specific conditions**
  4. **Integration** of multi-level and multi-element **planning** for operationalisation
  5. **Space categorisation** and **design** in line with three types of functions:
     a. ordinary buildings
     b. demonstrating and gathering buildings
     c. semiotic buildings and rural landscapes
3.4 Discussion on current architectural practice in rural China (1)

• Significance of the latest top-down systematic strategy:
  • The **representativeness** for most perceptions of rural construction and the future development (primarily based on actual projects and experience)
  • A **methodological** guidance for rural architectural practice
  • Top-down **feasibility**: well-stated cooperation forms and practice flow
  • **Effectiveness**: can fast achieve governmental goals on improving physical environment
3.4 Discussion on current architectural practice in rural China (2)

- Limitations of the latest top-down systematic strategy:
  - Compromise/avoid dealing with **predicaments** e.g. land tenure, rural governance, etc.
  - Emphasis on the **material** aspect of rural life
  - **Lacking** architectural **innovations** to sustain rural cultures and ecosystems
  - Implies **urban bias**: selecting sites, planning, designing space, and proposing development
  - Ordinary rural residents have very **limited chance** to speak out
  - **Few** consideration on **professionalisation** of construction of the villagers or collective labour for **bonding community**
3.4 Discussion on current architectural practice in rural China (3)

• General limitations: Inadequate consideration on multi-dimensional sustainability
  • Barely contribute to **inherit** the value of vernacular architecture **by the local**
  • Simplifying **problem** & **solution** causes similar spatial features in different regions
  • Seldom **exchange/pass on knowledge** or local architectural education
  • The local cannot **sustain** the social/environmental benefits of architectural practice
  • Limited **choice** of economic development: tourism and concomitant services
  • Limited mutual **planning** and climate change **preparedness** at a bottom level
  • **Professionalisation** of practiser: skill shortage on sustainable built environment design and interdisciplinary instruments of assessing, maintaining, managing, and operating rural physical infrastructure
4. Alternative for Rural Architectural Practice Towards Living Sustainably
4.1 Alternative: Learning rurality and rural space

• **Rurality analysis:**
  Materiality, representation, and imagination (Cloke 2006, Harvey 1996, p. 322)

• **Spatial grasp:**
  Key practice, product & means of production; power relation; policy agendas; social structure, interpretation, and negotiation behind space (Cloke 2006)

• **Innovation:**
  Enhancement of the spirit of place
  Reduce urban bias
  Modify capitalist or materialist orientation
4.2 Alternative: Bottom-up pathway

• For the local institutions:
  Understanding and engagement: changing mind and building cooperation
  Allowing the local to express their minds, hearing the bottom voice
  Identify their priorities, needs, desires, and aspirations

• For the local capital:
  Low-cost, sustainable, and decent solution
  Mutual learning between the local and the external practiser
  Considering and enabling the left-behind groups and regions

• For the local ecosystem services:
  Establishing consensus of ecological conservation with the local
  Environmentally sustainable innovation on the local architectural tectonics
4.3 Alternative: A framework of local architectural practice pattern

• **Context specification** (Idea of planning/design): Reflecting the past, grasping potentials, and enhancing foresight

• **Functionally** sustainable: Appreciating locality, increasing engagement and developing potentials

• **Procedurally** sustainable: Saving resource, exchanging/generating knowledge, transmitting culture & value

• **Materially** sustainable: Showcasing identity, caring for habitat, challenging consumerism, reuse/recreate

• **Managerially** sustainable: Cost-effectively, connections & participation, governance breakthroughs
5. Conclusion
5.1 Conclusion

• **Conceptual framework of rural sustainable living:**
  The developing of rurality should show sustainability through the lenses of institutions, capital, and ecosystem services, with the aim of achieving ruralite-centred well-being.

• **Needs of living sustainably in rural China:**
  A decent and endogenous life, which is also open-source and universally beneficial to all

• **Roles and problems of architectural practice in rural China:**
  Vitally influences development but fails to meet the above four needs of rural sustainable living in China.

• **Alternative architectural practice for living sustainably:**
  Learning the rurality and place and practicing bottom-up strategies considering functional, procedural, material, and managerial sustainability
5.2 Limitations and further study

• More attention paying to the **disparity** nature of rural China so that to **specify the four needs** of living sustainably.

• Work on the **targeted solutions** for the **specific spatial issues** that identified.

• More **empirical evidence** to demonstrate the effectiveness the framework of architectural **practice pattern** and to make further adjustment.
Thank you