Emerging Practices
Inquiry into the Developing

新兴实践：发展中的探究

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developing community

Envisioning Collective Wishes with Local Community for Social Innovation towards Village Regeneration in Inner Mongolia

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Abstract: This paper reports co-design interventions with local community of practice at Inner Mongolia, who are keepers of a vernacular architectural practice dated back to 2000 BC. The research aims to explore a social innovation method towards sustainable village regeneration in China. We report four days community engagements with tools and activities designed and implemented as a result of collaboration between three design researchers, local NGOs and the local community. We describe co-design interventions based on a framework of co-design which works through envisioning and enacting community's imagination for social innovation. We conclude by addressing the embodied co-design tools developed with the locals as an unobtrusive form of activities to engage community to work towards consensus. We addressed the importance of design activism, which take into the considerations local values, and to achieve social innovation through collaborative imagination of the community's collective wishes.

Keywords: *Co-design, community of practice, rural village, China, social innovation, village regeneration.*

1. Rural Reconstruction at Disappearing Villages in China

Modern China is undergoing rapid urbanization that rural villages are disappearing due to young villagers are giving up labor-intensive farming to work in towns and cities. This uneven distribution of urban-rural population changes Chinese social-cultural landscape. In contrary to most countries in the world, Chinese culture is largely preserved in the countryside due to the mainland's long history in farming where settlements gathered on fertile lands. These rural communities are also keepers of wide range traditional practices unique to China such as art and crafts, architectural, farming related, and more. The romantic feeling of traditional villages as happy living environments echoes particularly among urbanites who used to be villagers, but there is no going back. Infrastructure in the villages such as schools and clinics were closed down during the past twenty years, preventing young families to return to the village.

When the elderly generation in the villages deceases within next few decades, we will face a loss of traditional Chinese culture often preserved through these communities of practice dated back to thousands of years. To preserve this, we need to find new ways to integrate these disappearing traditional villages into modern China. The preservation of rural environment involves two issues: connecting rural population to their local traditions; and to do so with a strategy of sustainable development. It can be accomplished by introducing design process which takes into the consideration of elements such as farming, agriculture, local culture, landscape heritage, pollution control, education, social awareness, management, business and tourism. This would leads to an understanding urban-rural relationship in the flow of materials, information, funds and human resources.

1.1 Case study: The village of Yuan Zi Gou Cun

At our case study, the hamlet of Yuan Zi Gou Cun, the loss is an ancient cultural tradition of mud cave house construction dated back to 2000 BC. The unique way of building houses is done by digging into the mountain, only practiced by male villagers, passing down through generations without any documentation (see Figure 1). This paper reports a four days co-design engagement with village community of Yuan Zi Gou Cun (园子沟村) at rural Inner Mongolia, a northern region of China, a forgotten hamlet below a mountain located near the lake of DaiHai (岱海) and next to Liangcheng town (凉城). The engagement forms the beginning of a practice-based research project aims to develop co-design model of activism with local values in mind, with applied objective to help regenerate villages in China. To do so, we collaborated with local NGOs XiuShi Charity Foundation—a Beijing-based charity foundation who has charitable presence in the village since 2011; by adapting co-design framework to enact and envision with the villagers to innovate to encourage returnees back to live in the village.

The village was once a prosperous village with over 1600 inhabitants ten years ago is now left with fewer than 200 villagers. Majority of them

aged over sixty and still work as farmers for self-sufficiency, alongside women and infant children. The rapid decrease of village population causes close down on facilities such as schools and clinics, which further hinders the possibilities of returnees to the villages. XiuShi confirmed the availability of financial aid by the government to rural household in some remote areas and special provinces (like Inner Mongolia). Despite these efforts, we observed many abandoned houses, infrastructure and areas in the village.

Yuan Zi Gou Cun village presents a simple structure of a rural settlement. An elderly home and a small shop that sells basic good are located at the entrance of the village. Some of the roads are paved while most are mud roads, for example the main path that leads village entrance to the public space centered on the village's main fresh water source, a natural spring water well. Parallel to the main path is a narrow river streams from a bio-diversified mountain towards Daihai Lake just outside the village. Most habitats in the village are located along this path, including the village's only school, which is now closed. Even grounds naturally form common areas where villagers socially gathered after farming, before or after their dinner.

Life in the village centered on farming activities. The men, mostly elderlies, work from sunrise to mid afternoon on crops such as corn, maze, potatoes and wheat; for own consumption and for minimal income by selling the excess to agents. The government substitutes their living cost very minimally; while their children in the cities support a few lucky ones. Animals such as cows and donkeys are major forms of labor-intensive activities such as farming and transportation. Sheep are shepherded around the grounds of abandoned and exposed habitats.

The nearest town Liangcheng is 8 km away, structured along two main streets where shops, restaurants and services located. The town and the village despite such a short distance, present two contrasting standard of living: a remote area where inhabitants still use animals as a mean of transportation and a modern town where one drives a Jeep, and get entertainment at KTV Karaoke. This contrast is mirrored in thousands of villages in China.

Figure 1. Well-kept vernacular architectural practice cave and "modern" mud houses.

2. Research Methodology

The practice-based research has an applied aim to preserve the village's vernacular architectural practice by encouraging returnees. We sought localized, democratic and sustainable method that facilitates communities to create solutions for their everyday problems, which economic system is unable to address.[1] We collaborate closely with our NGO partner—XiuShi to ensure the problem can be addressed locally by villagers as a bottom up approach to meet top down policy made by the government.[2] We hope to enable social transformation and sustainable growth that modify current situation by replacing old individualistic values with a community sense of knowledge exchange and support. To do so, we explored and experimented with tools and methods to engage locals for the practice.

1 Ezio Manzini, "Design for Social Innovation vs. Social Design," *DESIS Network*, July 8, 2014, accessed October 1, 2014, http://desis-network.org/content/design-social-innovation-vs-social-design; Anna Meroni, *Creative Communities. People Inventing Sustainable Ways of Living* (Milano: Edizioni POLI.design, 2007).

2 Geoff Mulgan, Simon Tucker, Rushanara Ali, and Ben Sanders, "Social Innovation: What it is, why it matters and how it can be accelerated" (working paper, Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, Said Business School, University of Oxford, Oxford, 2007).

Figure 2. Social innovation with villagers, NGOs and volunteers.

3   Alan Bryman, *Mixed Methods* (London: SAGE, 2006).

4   Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (London: SAGE, 2014); Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1967).

5   "…you may not expect them to improve by only the actions of some benevolent but you need an active role from the rural insiders." See Robert Chambers, "The Origins and Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal," *World Development* 22, no. 7 (1994): 953–69.

6   Froukje Sleeswijk Visser, Pieter Jan Stappers, Remko van der Lugt, and Elizabeth B-N Sanders, "Contextmapping: Experiences from Practice," *Co-Design* 1, no. 2 (2005): 119–49; Liz Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers, *Convivial Toolbox: Generative Research for the Front End of Design* (Amsterdam: BIS Publisher, 2012).

7   Anna Meroni, Davide Fassi, and Giulia Simeone, "Design for Social Innovation as a form of Design Activism: An Action Format" (paper presented at Social Frontiers: The Next Edge of Social Innovation Research, London, United Kingdom, November, 2013).

8   Priscilla Chueng-Nainby and Miaosen Gong, "Collective Imagery: A Framework for Co-Design," *5th International Congress of International Association of Societies of Design Research,* IASDR (Tokyo: JSSD, 2013).

9   Ronald A. Finke, Thomas B. Ward, and Steven M. Smith, *Creative Cognition: Theory, Research, and Applications* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1992).

Mixed methods research was adopted with interventionist process happened alongside ethnographic observation.[3] Narratives were gathered and thematically analyzed with Grounded Theory approach.[4] We took advantage of multi-lingual, cross-cultural (Chinese, Italian, British) and interdisciplinary (co-design, environmental design, healthcare design and community NGOs). We take Chambers'[5] participatory rural appraisal that encourages local views from rural community to contribute to projects planning and management. In addition to members from XiuShi; village kids returned for the long weekend; and ex-teacher of the abandoned school, helped as ad hoc engagement assistants during fieldwork (see Figure 2, 3).

A series of community engagements were carried out centred on XiuShi's plan to encourage returnees through redesigning while preserving the vernacular habitat for eco-tourism. A week fieldwork during June 2014 was made possible by researchers in-kind time and travel cost funded by XiuShi. The abandoned school was used as our research base, while co-design interventions with the villagers and public took place near the school's entrance. Co-design interventions enable villagers to collectively innovate as the expert of their experiences.[6] Together we collect knowledge, envisioned context; and enacted ideas; which are often fuzzy and opportunistic; established interaction with the community, collecting insights and in-depth framework on current situation to inform future development.[7]

3. Collective Imagery Co-Design Framework

We facilitate villagers to co-design based on collective imagery framework,[8] which works on the externalization of individual creative imagery to share with others' as a common space for co-design activity to take place. Collective Imagery is a theoretical framework informed by practice-based research to extend Finke et al.'s work on pre-inventive structure of creative imagery for the study of co-design.[9] The shared collective imagery is a conceptual structure that represents community's shared design space of which connections of ideas are made possible through spatial activities of deconstruction, construction and reconstruction. The structural connectedness of ideas and data give rise to creative emergence of design concept.

Conceptual structuring begins with connections of two elements (facts and possibilities, however partial), which also connected into facets to form a coherent system of structure. This system if orientated in a design context,

10 Chueng-Nainby and Gong, "Collective Imagery"; Priscilla Chueng-Nainby, "Collective Imagery Weave: Visualizing knowledge to co-design with a community of research practitioners," in *Proceedings of the 19th DMI: Academic Design Management Conference Design Management in an Era of Disruption*, London College of fashion, ed. Erik Bohemia, Alison Rieple, Jeanne Liedtka, and Rachel Cooper (London: Design Management Institution, 2014); Priscilla Chueng-Nainby, "Co-Design in the Wild: A Collective Imagery Framework for Social Innovation," *CoDesign in the Wild* (blog), accessed September 10, 2014, http://www.priscilla.me.uk; Maaike Mulder-Nijkamp and Priscilla Chueng-Nainby, "Collective Brand Imagery Weave: Connecting Brand Values to Product Characteristics with Physical Complexity," in *Proceedings of 20th International Conference on Engineering Design*, Politecnico di Milano (Glasgow: Design Society, 2015).

is a conceptual structure of design solution. There are two types of structures experimented: 1) A system of connections which gives rise to clusters as concepts; and 2) conceptual structure constructed from narratives that connected into stories of design concepts. Story is a system (sequential or not) of interconnected narratives as abductive way of linking elements. Three interventions were implemented: Collective Weave, Spatial Co-Design and Performative Behavioral.

3.1 Collective Weave intervention

We envisioned using Collective Weave by collecting the villagers' stories of their views on the past and future living.[10] We began with writing or drawing of one's reflection on the past and wishes on the future on colorful tags and threads; and then make connections by threading with each other's tags to enact and envision community's collective imagery, in this case, on their village living. We engaged villagers in two one-hour sessions of collective weave by asking three questions: 1) How was your life in the village before? 2) How is your life in the village now? 3) What is your wish for future on your living?

To make accessible to villagers and the public, we installed a collective weave on an even ground tied to the trees in front of the abandoned school (see Figure 3). The collective weave stayed on display for the whole period of the fieldwork so anyone could come to browse and add to the content. We found most of the elderly villagers are illiterate. To overcome this, we engaged three Chinese native speaking NGOs as independent researchers to record villagers' reflections and wishes by writing or drawing on the tags as shown in. The collective weave was taken down right before we leave the fieldwork. We took photos of the tags as data collected on villagers' reflections on their pasts and wishes on their futures (Figure 4). XiuShi's manager, Mr. Li expressed the engagement tool as icebreakers and fun for the villagers, which was easy to use yet powerful to create connections.

3.2 Spatial co-design intervention

We introduced spatial co-design intervention to enact villagers to design their habitats (see Figure 5). With limited resources in the village, we made use of discarded cardboard as the habitat space and tags to represent functional spaces. Villagers, researchers and NGOs, gathered in front of the abandoned school, sitting on foldable stools, and engaged in co-designing

Figure 4. Interpretive Analysis on tags and photos.

Figure 5. Spatial co-design intervention to redesign habitat with villagers.

Figure 6. Performative behavioural intervention on garbage collection.

11 Eva Brandt and Camilla Grunnet, "Evoking the Future: Drama and Props in User Centered Design," in *Proceedings of Participatory Design Conference*, Malmö University, ed. Thomas Bindrer, Judith Gregory, and Ina Wagner (Palo Alto, CA: Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, 2000), 11–20.

their habitats. We asked two questions for this intervention: 1) How is your house now; and 2) How might you like your house design to be if cost is not a problem?

We labeled on tags to represent various functional rooms and spaces. The villagers extended the tools by improvising with natural materials such as stones and tree branches to represent and manipulate spaces. One elderly woman used her walking stick to draw on the sandy ground. It shows hands on manual capability of the community of practice. We capture their stories on the vernacular practice of mud house construction, which they described with verbal description over arrangement on the cardboard and drawing on the ground. We took photos of the designs for analysis to inform future research.

3.3 Performative behavioral intervention

The final activity was a performative intervention in the form of an outdoor drama, problem in the village (Figure 6).[11] During our stay, we came across rubbish scattered around their water sources such as the spring water well and the lake. Most rubbish was dated plastic packaging. The villagers are unaware of the risk of pollution. At a fieldwork break during the third day, when most men were at the farm; the research team spent three hours collecting garbage along the river and natural spring water well.

We did not plan this activity as an intervention but it caught the attention of mostly female villagers who were as usual gather at the other end of the public space across the river. Eventually three of them came to enquire about our seemingly strange act. We took this opportunity to explain to them the risk of plastic garbage in the water source. Two female villagers hang around and one (seemingly the youngest) joined in. The opportunistic

act became a performative behavioral intervention that is creative yet effective to participatory reflection in action with the community to make aware of environmental issue.

4. Collective Insights from Village Community

Patterns emerged from collective weave depict a sense of loneliness and hopelessness among the elderly villagers and their wishes to be reunited with their children, even though they identified themselves as the burden for the better future of their children in the cities. However, they recognized that it will be difficult for them to get use to the life despite warm water in a city apartment. That they tend to feel more isolated in the cities, while they have friends and social network in the villages. Even though they feel lonely as their children are far away, they prefer village's simple life and air quality. The villagers' main activities were growing crops, feeding livestock and domestic fowling. Yet they felt healthy and happy with strength from living among big family. There was trust among villagers—it was not necessary to lock their properties. Nevertheless, many chose to move out even though their current living condition is better than the past with government support such as health insurance.

General issues include the decreased in village population, governmental policies, and the lack of healthcare, education, and entertainment; as well as weather related issues that affected farming. Aging is the main concern. One widow expressed her reluctance to live in the elderly home, as the decision will brings negative reputation on their children, even though she does not mind doing so. Villagers with children in the cities expressed their wishes to design for their children to return home to live even though it is only during the holidays. One villager designed the whole house with rooms dedicated to each of his adult children.

In general, a typical "modern" one-level mud house (see Figure 7) is built using bricks with a mix of soil and hay, produced locally at communal kilns located at the bottom of the mountain. Usually two bedrooms are linked through a living room in the middle, which faces a courtyard leading to the street. The bedroom is a multifunctional space where oddly includes stoves for cooking and heating. The bed is a wide heated platform where they spend most of the time on to rest and sleep. The toilet is located outdoor as a kind of primitive composting toilet surrounded by low walls, which provide just enough privacy. Vegetable plots and life stocks such as chickens and pigs populate the courtyard, which is also used as public space to gather and as a connecting space to the countryside.

Most villagers are happy with the size of their current habitat. They described room sizes in square meters, like most Chinese do. Majority did not ask for bigger space despite given the cost free scenario. A post-engagement reflective discussion among researchers and NGOs who are mainly city dwellers were impressed by the sense of contentment among the villagers

Figure 7. The "modern" mud house habitat.

Figure 8.   Happy inventions.

on their interior space. We interpret this tendency not as design fixation, but rather the local view on living habitat—an issue we will explore in future work.

And finally, is the villagers' unique spatial perspective. We have asked the villagers to depict their habitat using bird eyes view, which we set out with the tool. Following several failed attempts, we realized that every villagers naturally imagined their design using front door view. The bird eyes view learned from architectural drawing familiar for the researchers and NGOs is not a spatial perspective useful for the villagers. We immediately adopted the front door perspective and customized the tags suitable for the perspective. With this, we argue for the importance of local perspective on spatial design.

5. Concluding Remarks

The research sets out to find ways to regenerate the village by co-design with the villagers using three intervention tools. Collective Weave envisioned with the villagers reflections on their past and current village living. Spatial co-design intervention enacted design with the villagers of their current habitat and their wishes for future habitat. Performativity behavioral intervention encouraged awareness on environmental issues by collecting up old garbage in the village.

The interventions were carried out collaboratively with the villagers and members of the NGO who has presence at the village since 2011. The co-design activities were carried out in pleasant surroundings under good weather and the atmosphere is sociable and unobtrusive. Figure 8 shows social bonding between the villagers and research team within four days.

Through co-design, we introduced interventions to give voice to the villagers to make their wishes. Collectively they were able to visualize and act towards their future. As the tag contents shown the hopelessness of a disappearing village, the interventions brought hope to the villagers in a profound way. From reflecting on their pasts to envisioning their wishes;

and towards enacting their design, the villagers were able to collectively projecting their hope for a better future living in the village.

5.1 Design activism by envisioning local values

As researchers, our time at the village is limited. The four days intervention has no doubt given the villagers hopes towards their future. However, one needs to consider the sustainability of the effort. What will happen after we leave the village? Will they continue to feel hopeful and work towards their future? Will they pick up the garbage? Will the situation change? The answers could be and most likely no. We ought to ask how sustainable the interventions can be? Is there a way to involve the villagers to work on the intervention themselves? If so, what kind of social structure are we changing? One needs to address the potential of these interventions to avoid being obtrusive on the villagers' life.

Collaborating with NGOs and the local authorities allows the continuity of the research. Mr. Lee and Ms Ying from Xiushi foundation gave helps and advice in the structure of the village life and how to approach the locals. Local authorities such as the ex school teacher and the village head allowed us seamless connection with the villagers and effortless interventions. By having village kids as ad hoc engagement assistants, we allowed the research team to focus on the strategy of interventions and the emerged results and focus.

In view of this, we argue for the importance of design activism which taking in locals to act towards social innovation, to be made possible through co-design interventions. It is important to work with younger generation, for example the village kids, to allow social change such as returnees to the village come from this generation, who will be the returnees. They have more likelihood to socially innovate to create jobs and infrastructure for village living.

5.2 Village regeneration, or not?

The research sets out with an ideal and almost sentimental call to regenerate village in China. XiuShi charity has been working on three villages on this purpose and has since changed their project title from "village regeneration" to "village revival." The view is that there is no longer possible to regenerate village to its former glory without a change in the village living. The value in retaining village life is in the maintenance of regional identity essential for social cohesion and community values.[12] However, one could question if giving new life to an abandoned village at remote rural area by preserving old buildings and public spaces, a deliberate act too idealistic?

There are examples of village regeneration out of China, for example Matera at southern Italy, which has similar architectural practice to Yuan Zi Gou Cun. Matera was inhabited until the Second World War by farmers who were living with life stocks in their cave houses dig into the mountain. Due to hygienic reason, they were forced to move to a purpose built village

[12] Miguel Hernandez Lopez, Paul Wakefield, Carolina Trujillo, Monica Zgaib, and Rafael Moneo, "The Workers Village Project: Incorporating Heritage Buildings into Urban Regeneration," *Global Urban Development* 4, no.1 (2008).

13 The European Capital of Culture is a city designated by the European Union for a period of one calendar year during which it organizes a series of cultural events with a strong European dimension. http://www.matera-basilicata2019.it/en/.

14 See "Torri Superiore," http://www.torri-superiore.org/?lang=en.

15 Anna Meroni and Daniela Sangiorgi, *Design for services* (Farnham: Gower, 2011), 12.

16 Francesca Ferguson, *Make Shift City: Renegotiating the Urban Commons* (Berlin: Jovis, 2014).

for more than twenty years by the Italian government. Today Matera is the winner of 2019 European Capital of Culture,[13] due to the terrific process of renewal by preserving the houses and turned them into small eco-museum or diffused hospitality structures from low price B&B to boutique hotel.

Another example is Torri Superiori, an abandoned village at the Liguria region in Italy. During the early eighties, a group of NGOs worked to renew the village by using sustainable technologies and encouraged sustainable practices. Nowadays it is one the best practices among the eco-village community.[14] However, we could argue if these villages as they are now, a village? That we could argue the need for village regeneration in general, and specifically in essence what the work towards village regeneration truly means for China?

With this first in-the-field research, we could start to define a first draft of guidelines for future interventions of similar context that could include: the preservation of culture and traditional way of life, a support to the population in adapting to a new lifestyle towards modernity, a research for the right technology use of materials to the development of the villages, a control of local resources and costs of investment, the development of a long-term strategy and a cooperation between people and local realities. These points will be taking into account in the next steps of this on-going project by taking into account that any transformation, even if developed through participatory actions, always requires a process of adoption by users themselves.[15]

5.3 Future work

The paper reports interpretive analysis on the first fieldwork of a longitudinal study on village regeneration in China. Second fieldwork will commence during summer 2016, which aims to involve new stakeholders in the regeneration process. Taken in the above-discussed propositions, we plan to involve the village kids on the design and action of future interventions. Together we hope to develop local awareness on the idea of preservation.[16] We will also open up the research to involve design postgraduates at nearby universities such as Tsinghua Academy of the Art. On the other hand, there is a trend of returnees going back to villages in China to buy land. Through crowd funding, XiuShi Charity is working towards acquiring lands in the village to prevent them from the exploitation by housing market. Most importantly, we will continue to work closely with XiuShi and other NGOs, designers and local authorities to find a novel model of village revival based upon design activism, by co-designing with the locals for social innovation towards village regeneration.

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