

# 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



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# 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**



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# 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”.



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# 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



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# 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



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# 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)



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# 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.



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# 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



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# 2. Rural Development and Life in China



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# 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)



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# 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



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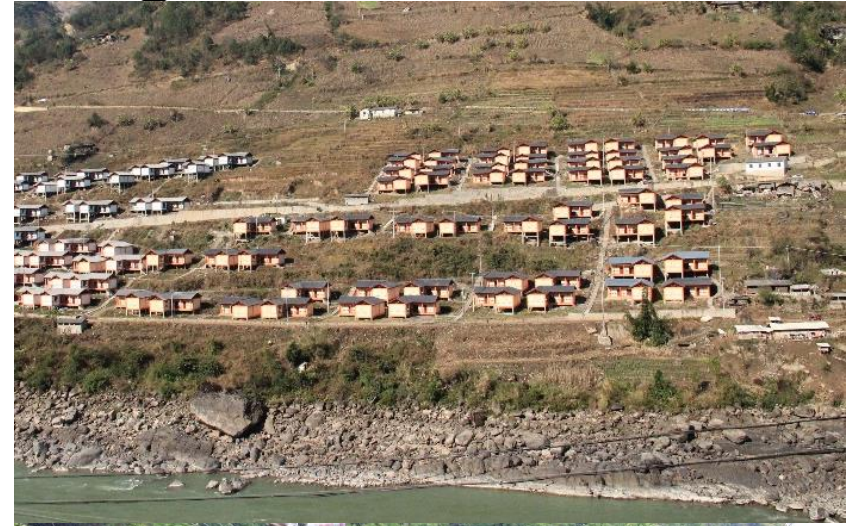


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# Rural China in change



# 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)



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# 3. Rural Architectural Practice in China



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# 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



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# 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



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### Designed village

Picture from: [http://www.guanchna.cn/local/2017\\_01\\_10\\_388683.shtml](http://www.guanchna.cn/local/2017_01_10_388683.shtml)



### Designed village

Picture from: <http://zj.zjol.com.cn/tj/510665.html>



### Conserved traditional village

Picture from: [https://ding03.c-trip.com/images/fd/tg/g3/M00/34/1B/CggYG1Y0ZmAKGrDADZsWdibR2w801\\_C\\_350\\_230.jpg](https://ding03.c-trip.com/images/fd/tg/g3/M00/34/1B/CggYG1Y0ZmAKGrDADZsWdibR2w801_C_350_230.jpg)



### Industrial vs Vernacular



### Modernised village

<http://tieba.baidu.com/p/1063665085>

# 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



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# 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



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# 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**



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# 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



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# 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



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# 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**



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# 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



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# 4. Alternative for Rural Architectural Practice Towards Living Sustainably



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# 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



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# 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 practitioner  
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



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# 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



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# 5. Conclusion



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# 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



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## 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.



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# Thank you



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