

# Hou Hanru and Ou Ning Test of Our Vision: A Conversation

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*The Bishan Project is one of China's boldest social experiments in recent years. For six years – from 2010 to 2016 – the rural reconstruction and practical utopian commune project ran its course in Bishan, a small village in the Anhui Province. The invitations the project received for exhibition and presentation abroad incited a national debate in China.*

*The texts collected in Ou Ning's Utopia in Practice: Bishan Project and Rural Reconstruction (2020) describe and criticize the social problems caused by China's overzealous urbanization process. These discourses on contemporary agrarianism and agritopianism resist the doctrines of modernism and developmentalism that have dominated China for more than a century, and respond to a global desire for alternative social solutions – in theory and action – to today's environmental and political crises.<sup>1</sup>*

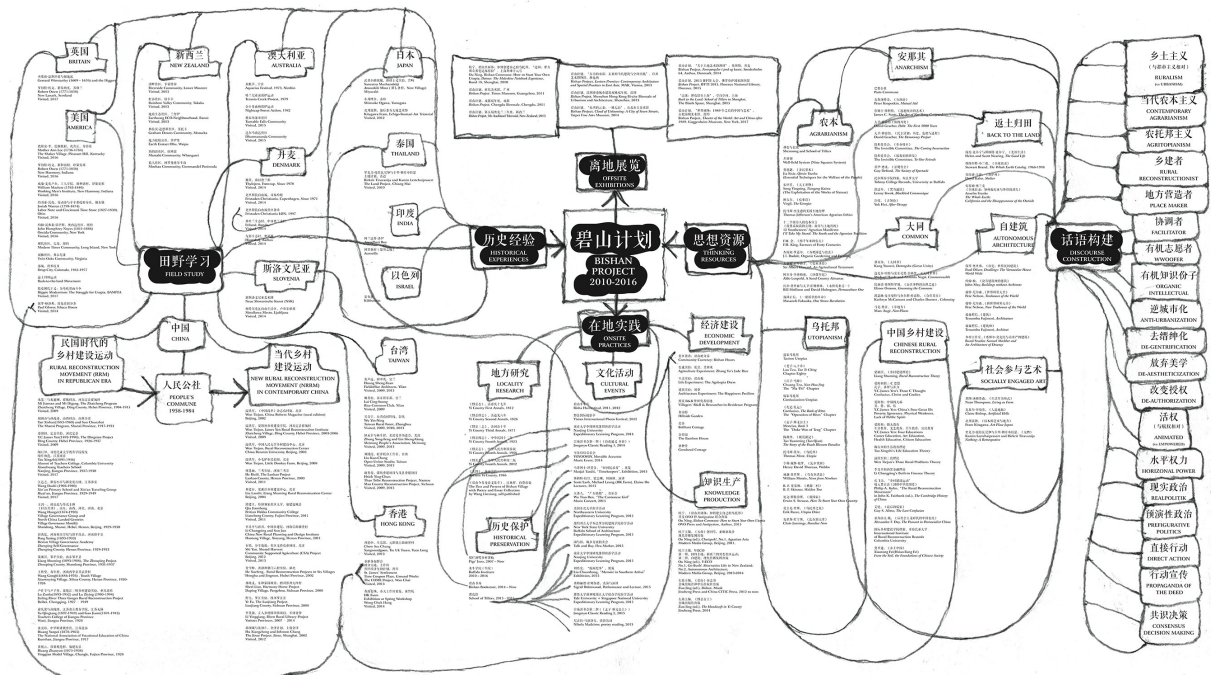
*From May 25–29, Ou Ning and Hou Hanru carried out the following conversation about the book on WeChat – between Briançon, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, France, and Jingzhou, Hubei Province, China.*

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**Hou Hanru:** Hi, Ou Ning! In this very strange and challenging lockdown period, I had the chance to read through most of your new book. It's a very timely contribution to the current need for reflection on the difficulty of continuing to live in a world that has been so dominated and transformed by "globalization" and urbanization. There is a global tendency to "return" to nature – to the countryside – and also to the "local." (In particular, Rem Koolhaas and AMO's recent exhibition "Countryside, The Future" at the Guggenheim may trigger discussions on the topic.) At the same time, doubts and "corrections" offered to the modernization model, as well as new values brought on by the pandemic, may constitute a "timely rain." Renewed interest in the countryside might also be turned into a superficial "fashion." Your experiments in Bishan, which lasted for years, were very down-to-earth and even "prophetic." Sometimes their "persistent" idealism was radical. Their value should not be limited to fashionable discussions.

In many ways, as a matter of fact, this notion of "returning to the origin" is impossible. Not only is returning impossible, but the "origin" itself has never really existed! What has existed and continues to exist is history, with all sorts of diversities of how human beings live in the world by transforming it and inscribing the process into memory. There have always been entanglements between idealism and realism, between utopianism and "real life." With the inspiration from the legacy of anarchism, you tried to

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The mind map of Bishan Project by Ou Ning for the exhibition "Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World," Guggenheim Museum, 2017-2018. Designed by Xiaoma + Chengzi, 2017.

mobilize public awareness toward embracing social equality, and encouraged independent initiatives to realize their own “selves.” “Returning” to the countryside here is about a kind of one-to-one dialogue to enlighten everyone’s potentiality, especially for those who have been categorized as peasants and farmers, who are often stuck at the bottom of modern societal structures. If the topic of the countryside is now fashionable, and therefore, another excuse for consumption, then this “return” could become a double punishment for those already living in the countryside – people who stand the risk of enduring more exploitation and ideological injustice. How do you think your book can contribute to the challenge of changing this dilemma?

**Ou Ning:** Hi, Hanru! Thank you for taking the time to read my manuscript and for starting this dialogue. In fact, the countryside already became a “fashion” in the decade before the Covid-19 outbreak. This has been one reaction to the problems of over-urbanization. People regard the countryside as a destination to escape the urban problems of overcrowding, air pollution, fierce competition for job opportunities, and educational resources. Of course, there are also intellectuals who pay attention to the bankruptcy

of agriculture, the depression of the rural area, the atomization of farmers, and the “upside down” urban-rural relationship. Some of these intellectuals advocate for “rural reconstruction” to carry out social reform.

At least in China, the countryside has already received and digested shifting crises passed along from the cities, for example when the two international financial crises occurred in 1997 and 2008. In other words, the countryside has long been a “landing site” for crisis transformation. This did not start with the current pandemic at all. My writings and practices may have boosted the popularity of rural issues in public discourse in recent years, especially through a large-scale debate that unfolded in China in 2014. This particular instance overflowed the circle of rural research and reconstruction, and turned it into a national “clamor.” However, as the collected writings in my book show, I was alert from the beginning to the “gentrification” of the countryside – that is, how the urban middle class poured into, occupied, and consumed the countryside. This made for a “population reshuffle” rather than a solution to the depopulation problem in the countryside. I think that the recent arrivals and

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The Bishan Supply and Marketing Cooperative, 1970s. Courtesy of Cultural Center of Yi County.





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A film screening part of "Screen Nostalgia," 2011 Bishan Harvestival. Photo: Hu Xiaogeng, 2011.



The villagers helped to install the “Coal and Ice” exhibition in 2012 Yixian International Photo Festival. Photo: Sun Yunfan.

who, in some cases, benefitted from land sales). In this new type of social relationship, an unprecedented “autonomous region of urban-rural integration” was formed. Did this kind of research stimulate your interest in “autonomy” and “communes”? The return of migrant workers has brought these experiences back into the wider rural area anew. What inspiration has this had on the popular push for urbanization, or more accurately “townization” (*chengzhenhua*), in recent years? Does this also mean that the direction of your experiment of “activating rural life” is not a romantic “return to nature,” but rather a process of self-enlightenment?

**ON:** Without your kind invitation to participate in the Venice Biennale in 2003, the San Yuan Li project would not have happened. I still remember that when you set up the theme “Z.O.U.” (Zone of Urgency), which focused the exhibition on the radical urbanization movement in the Asia-Pacific region, I picked up the phenomenon of “urban villages” in Guangzhou to resonate with your curatorial thoughts. My interest in San Yuan Li originated from my brief visit and stay there during my college days, while Koolhaas’s *Great Leap Forward*, published in 2001, opened my eyes to the “alternative modernity” in the Pearl River Delta.

Today, looking back at the indigenous villagers of San Yuan Li, I realize that the wisdom they radiated in their cramped living space is exactly what James C. Scott summed up in his peasant study as “metis,” or in plain terms, “cunning.”<sup>5</sup> The villagers followed the government-stipulated building dimensions on the ground level. But then they expanded the construction area as far as possible from the second floor onwards, thus forming a spectacle of “handshake buildings” with only “one line of sky.” These buildings block out the sun, transforming the streets into dark mazes. A policeman who is not familiar with “local geography” will absolutely not be able to catch hidden criminals. They have created an inexpensive, convenient community space that’s open twenty-four hours a day to new college graduates and migrant workers without temporary residence permits. It seems chaotic, but in fact it has its own hidden order. In the new era of urbanization, villagers have also corporatized the traditional village organization. Their collective assets not only make dividends every year, but also maintain large, village-run security teams. The village association and community school (*shexue*), which was used to mobilize villagers against Britain during the Opium War, evolved into a new form of autonomy.

This is the vitality of Chinese rural society, especially in Guangdong, where urbanization began at its earliest in China. This lively, teeming

urban village was once diagnosed as a “cancer” in the eyes of the municipal government, but we made an experimental documentary film to demonstrate its social value. Being in San Yuan Li also inspired my further studies of rural society. I wanted to find out about its genes and different variations. Why did it decay in one place, and survive with tenacity in another? This was the starting point for my later move to the countryside. Of course, it is not for seclusion in nature, it is “self-enlightenment.” Thank you for providing such an accurate statement.

The later “*chengzhenhua*” did not absorb the informal vitality of urban villages, because it is a top-down arrangement and reflected more of a state will to solve rural problems. “Townization” refers to the use of administrative means and national resources to concentrate farmers in nearby towns, providing them with orderly and standard houses that have been professionally planned, while vacated rural homesteads and cultivated land are used to develop vacation tourism and industrialized agriculture. This is a typical modernist rural reconstruction and governance scheme. It still belongs to the storyline of urbanization, reflecting the government’s imagination of “modernity” in rural areas.

The cost is staggering. In the book, I quoted a report from the National Academy of Governance on the cost of urbanization. The report points out that in the eight years between 2013 and 2020, the annual additional financial cost for transforming farmers-turned-migrant-workers into registered urban residents will amount to 226.138 billion yuan. The National Bureau of Statistics shows that in 2012, the total number of farmers-turned-workers nationwide was 262.61 million, of whom 163.36 million were farmers-turned-migrant-workers. After farmers move into urban residential areas, if there is no guarantee of employment opportunities, they will even have difficulty paying their electricity bills. Therefore, some farmers moved back to the village to live their former lives. The National Academy of Governance report also predicts that if the 160 million migrant workers all become registered urban residents at one time, the minimum additional financial expenditure will reach nearly 1.8 trillion yuan.<sup>6</sup>

**HHR:** As the edges of modernization, rural areas have always been the object of economic and political centers’ attempts to cover, intervene into, develop, and utilize them. Between the government and NGOs, there are all kinds of elites trying to project their imaginations and schemes into this “marginal zone” in order to realize their social ideals. There are peaceful inducements and radical revolutions. Whether in peace or violence, they all take the



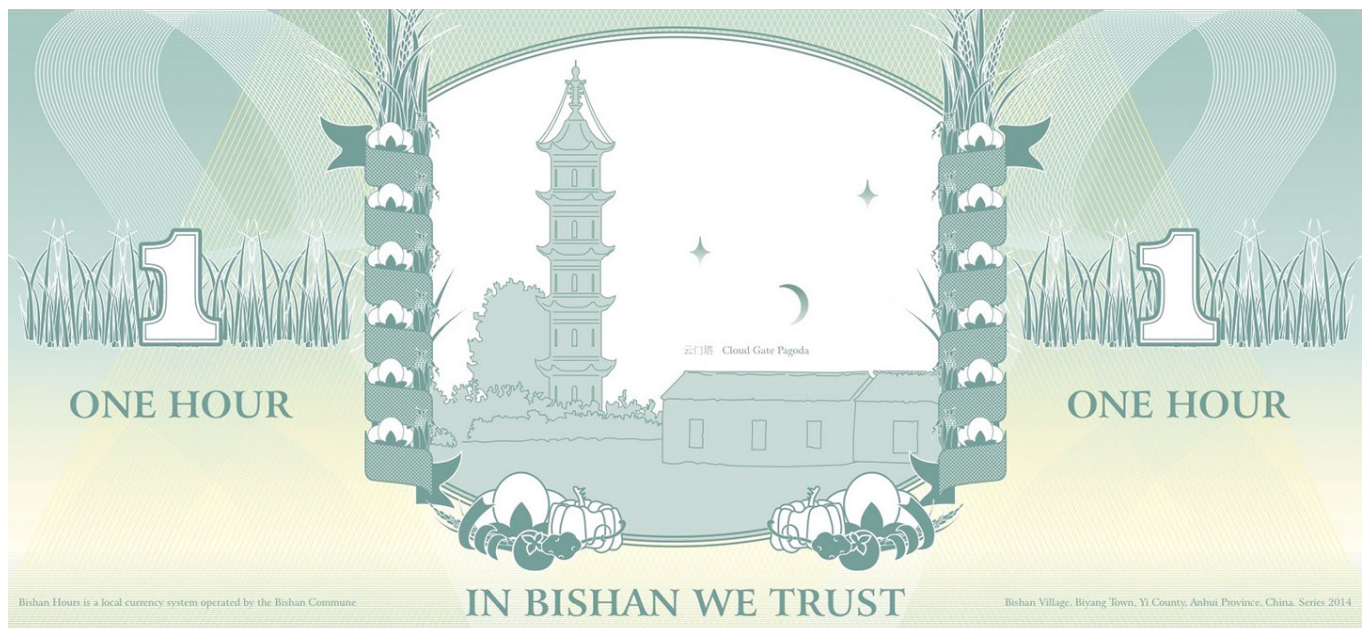
“improvement” of rural living conditions as a premise to try to “reform” the relationship between human beings and nature. They are somewhat of the belief that “man is sure to conquer nature,” and that the utopian spirit is its fundamental motive force. So how can the wishes of the “native” rural residents be represented and expressed? The starting point of your work must also be based on this contradiction. How do you face it?

**ON:** Rural areas cannot be ignored by any political power in any period. For the premodern, Confucian-driven empires dominated by imperial power, the countryside was the source of the *suigu* (grain tax) and guarded the lifeblood of the economy. Settled agriculture itself was the ideological basis for the successive dynasties to worship the gods of earth and grain together with their ancestries in the temples (*sheji*, *zongmiao*), and to use this practice as the symbol of legitimacy. Therefore, even if the countryside was “far away from the center,” it would be organized by the central power to unite the people and administer the tax incomes in a unified way. When China entered the modern era, the warlords who divided power and separated the country would plunder the wealth of the countryside to support the food supply. The Communist Party’s revolution could not have succeeded without the support of the countryside.

In the contemporary era, the stability of the countryside remains the singular most important political factor. In Japan, the countryside was an

important source of soldiers, which of course allowed for the militarism necessary to wage war. During the Pacific War, the Japanese government kicked off the “Imperial Rural Establishment Movement” to ensure the state machine’s control and monopoly over the countryside. In the United States, Roosevelt’s New Deal drummed up vast public resources to support agriculture. In addition to coping with the food crisis caused by the Great Depression, another motivation behind the New Deal was related to the large agricultural population attached to the land before the rise of largescale industrialized agriculture. This population was a very important sources of Roosevelt voters. Trump’s election was also inseparable from the support of the US agricultural region and the “Rust Belt.” Politicians have always regarded farmers as passive electoral tools. In fact, farmers can and do also actively “create” their own agents and leaders. One can imagine that if the only farmers left in the United States were those in Koolhaas’s exhibition who monitor “farming” by robots through screens at home, a large number of agricultural communities would die out and the political ecology of the US would be more easily controlled by Wall Street. Farmers have not been totally deprived, but the decrease in population will weaken the political influence of this group.

Therefore, in 2016, several writers wrote books to trace the history of the communitarian utopian movement in the US in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Some of these authors advocated



“In Bishan We Trust”, the community currency Bishan Hours. Designed by Xiaoma + Chengzi. 2014.



learning from and reviving the land philosophies of early intentional communities who put down roots in rural areas of the United States, such as the Shakers. They were, of course, representative of groups who insisted on investing as much manpower as possible, using recyclable natural energy, and implementing a collective system of communal ownership of property to run agriculture and communities.

However, as you said, a “return” is impossible on many levels. But it is necessary to maintain a certain number of farmers, to maintain a rural lifestyle, and to operate agriculture in an eco-friendly way. These are necessities not only for the sake of sustaining the diversity of human life or saving an available political force, but also because modern nation-states cannot cut ties with agriculture, rural areas, and farmers.

Just imagine if China’s “urbanization” turns all farmers into registered urban residents and no one cultivates the land. Wouldn’t that jeopardize the supply of food and place the feeding of the entire population into the risky waters of international trade and global economic integration? Moreover, farmers are not “human waste” eliminated by the modernization process, as many people think. Their “cunning” wisdom is often unexpected. Their “brain mine” (to use James Yen’s term) is rich, but ignored.<sup>8</sup> The problem of contemporary Chinese farmers is that they live at the bottom of an “authority-driven” society where state power permeates in a totalizing way. These farmers can neither return to the “autonomy of the landed gentry” of the era of monarchy, in which “imperial power extended down only to the county level,” nor can they speak through the electoral system like American farmers. The space to realize their

potential is very limited. As an outsider with neither power nor capital, all I can do in the countryside is use my own cultural resources to improve farmers and villagers’ visibility in society, broaden their contact with the outside world, and build platforms within my ability to let them give full play to their intelligence. Under limited, realistic conditions, so-called “empowerment” and “moralization” are all extravagant to me, and they are also part of an elite rhetoric that I oppose. I prefer the words “mutual aid,” “mutual learning,” and “communal life.”

**HHR:** In essence, you firmly believe in the classic principle of modernity that “knowledge is power,” and hope to bring that through personal and “autonomous” efforts to a place where cultural independence has been lost. That way, people can rediscover and implement self-esteem and power in various ways, while using communication and sharing as the methods to seek equality within this process. As your experiment in Bishan shows, some form of autonomous community can indeed sprout. Because of this real possibility, the project also sparked a repressive response from upper-level institutions. The rejection and suppression of the diversity of personal and social life and values is the center of the problem. This is not only China’s increasingly threatening trend in recent decades, but also the situation caused by the mainstream and increasingly “globalized” forces of developmentalism and capital. At the same time, the forces of reflection and resistance, especially the “organic intellectuals” and NGOs, are also constantly trying to put forward alternative opinions and solutions. The Covid-19 pandemic has sounded the alarm for everyone. It’s gotten us stuck in the negative effects of the



Liu Chuanhong, part of *Act II, Scene 11 on Yi County*, 2014. 601cm x 43cm. In the *Memoir in Southern Anhui*, a visual narrative project including 14 sets of works that made up of 38 pieces of landscape and still life oil paintings, and a hundred freehand textual sketches including traveling diaries, military maps, attacking plans, arms diagrams, Kung Fu charts, and local social research records. These create a story about a “bandit leader” character named “Mr. Liu” who journeyed around Japanese-occupied Southern Anhui area between 1940 and 1942. The project was exhibited in the School of Tillers, 2015.

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Villagers at the School of Tillers for a film screening of artist Liu Chuanhong's work, 2015. Photo: Zhu Rui.

developmentalism model of modernity, and at the same time has proven the value of your efforts and those of like-minded people. The publication of your book should be a timely call to action. How can you continue your experiment in practice? Art and culture are an important part of your “experimental field.” How can you cultivate some kind of “rural autonomy aesthetics”?

**ON:** The new Covid-19 pandemic has certainly dealt a heavy blow to the proud achievement of “globalization.” It freezes the “borderless, barrier-free, and far-reaching” mobility of human beings. Not only has it deprived life and destroyed the economy, but it also urges the reorganization of the global political structure. Here are some of the things that happened: transnational capital began to flow back or transfer elsewhere; the global economic supply chain began to “unhook” voluntarily; the significance of international organizations and political alliances was put in doubt; the people who left town in haste eventually wanted to return; the voices of nationalism, localism, and protectionism previously regarded as “conservative and retrograde” had more supporters; and the long-marginalized “anti-globalization” movement unexpectedly gained more convincing power. Environmentalists were overjoyed that the economic shutdown and travel ban might lead to a reduction in the overall carbon footprint and a slowdown in global warming. People like me who moved to the countryside almost ten years ago were also considered to have “foresight.”

In fact, I think that after the pandemic subsides, people will remain unwilling or unable to give up the convenience and prosperity of “globalization” and will gradually return to pre-pandemic inertia. However, after this unprecedented crisis, especially in the case of possible economic depression, the small, decentralized, low-cost, nature-friendly mutual aid communities that I have always been keen on may become a pragmatic choice for people. For the past two years, I have been living in Jingzhou, a small city along the Yangtze River in Hubei Province, which is only two hundred kilometers from Wuhan, the birthplace of the pandemic. Jingzhou has a rich history and natural resources to explore, and the cost of living is not high. The quality of life here is very good, but I no longer have a chance to continue communitarian experiments like in Bishan.

Bishan is a traditional agricultural settlement located in the mountain valley of southern Anhui, but in my vision, from the years when I lived there, it should be an open and international village. Today’s rural areas no longer rely on “defensive houses,” “fortresses

towers,” or “walled villages” to form a closed society to fight against banditry as they did before. They should welcome more outsiders to join as “locals.” The rural society that relied on clan groups, armed self-defense, and *yicang* (communal grain storage) to cultivate together and cope with the crises of natural disasters and war is gone forever. However, during this pandemic period, many villages across China have still wanted to isolate the virus by cutting off village roads. This may be effective in the short term, but under normal conditions, villages are no longer as self-sufficient and isolated as they used to be. According to my experience in Bishan, what the villagers eat is not the rice they grow, but Northeast rice or Thai rice from the market. Therefore, when I say that the village should be built as a “place,” this does not refer to traditional “localism” or “protectionism,” but rather to a site-specific “community” that is open and diversified with common memory and identity at the same time. Just as Wes Jackson, an American sustainable agriculture experimenter, said in his 1993 book *Becoming Native to This Place*, the village should welcome “homecomers” who are not necessarily native to jointly cultivate a new “nativeness.”<sup>9</sup>

In a similar way, I regard the agrarianism that originated from China’s legendary *Shennong* era and spread to the Asian region as a cherished ideological tradition, but, at the same time, I am very wary of its evolution into nationalism. The influence of this tradition became a disaster after it was converted into nationalism by Japan before WWII, then further expanded into Pan-Asianism, and was finally absorbed into the ideological framework of the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere,” to become a war theory. I also understand the importance of rural ecological protection, but not in response to calls for anthropocentrism, such as “protecting the earth for future generations.” Instead, I think this protection has to stem from the acceptance of land ethics and natural rights. Extreme ecologism may also turn into terrorism, while environmentalism will continue to be absorbed by the updated capitalist system, because products labeled with variations on “environmental protection” can be sold at higher prices. In terms of ecological construction, the countryside is faced with the difficult problem of how to release its economic potential while protecting its ecology. For example, the historical preservation of villages cannot only rely on incorrigibly obstinate rules, but must also realistically consider the space of development.

In what you call “aesthetics,” Bishan has a very broad space to develop. First of all, its eye-catching Hui-style architectural heritage can be called representative of Chinese vernacular





A hand-built bamboo tea house “Happiness Pavilion” in construction, January 20, 2016. The project was an architectural cooperative experiment by the villagers, Qian Shi'an, Cheng Guofu, Chu Chunhe, and Ou Ning. Photo: Ou Ning.

architectural art. In the process of activating these historic buildings over the course of the project, we tried our best to keep their traditional design and appearance, but introduced various facilities that conform to modern living standards, endowed them with more functions suitable for practical use, and even adopted the minimalist interior style of the traditional Japanese house. The materials and furnishings used in the renovation process are all taken from a second-hand goods market in Yi County, so the final effect is very “local.” In addition, Huizhou’s rural folk craft tradition is also very rich. It has become a source of inspiration for many of the artists and designers participating in the Bishan Project. Slovenian artist Matjaž Tančič used 3D photography to take portraits of villagers in Yi County with their hall decorations, showing the relationship between the traces time has on their bodies and their spiritual space. Liu Chuanhong, a Chinese artist, made more than 140 oil paintings full of local details in a crude style similar to “peasant paintings.” He divided them into different chapters according to the rural geography of southern Anhui, and set up a fictional narrative about a folk ranger traveling through the region. Graphic designers Xiaoma and Chengzi designed a set of changeable visual communication systems for the Bishan Project, all based on local folk visual materials. In addition to engaging these foreign professional artists, we published and exhibited villagers’ hand-drawn Bishan landscapes and hand-made bamboo arts, arranged their Yi County Minor and Huangmei opera performances, and facilitated their interactions with the foreign artists. In a word, what we were exploring together was an aesthetic that could be called “contemporary vernacular.”

**HHR:** In your practice, your emphasis on the contemporary nature of “vernacular art” was the fundamental motivation to seek this “aesthetic.” However, deeper changes in daily life and conditions were reflected in architectural projects. For example, the cooperation between you and the villagers resulted in a new contemporary “rural architecture.” Of course, such explorations have evolved elsewhere in recent history too. Some examples are found in the work of Johan van Lengen of the Intuitive Technology and Bio-Architecture School (TIBÁ), who wrote the popular book *The Barefoot Architect*; Samuel Mockbee of the Rural Studio at Auburn University; and so on. Not to mention the various practices of “green building” all over the world today. There are also a large number of architects who are skilled at turning “environmental protection” and “back-to-roots” mentalities into “politically correct” symbols and propaganda images for new capital accumulation

and expansion. Nowadays, new buildings and urban planning almost inevitably have to wrap their facades in “green” so that they can be successfully promoted in politics and the market. I recently wrote a statement on the topic, titled “Green is Capital.”<sup>10</sup> How do you face this contradiction when exploring “contemporary vernacular”?

**ON:** Regarding “green capital,” Xi Jinping has a vivid saying: “Green mountains and clear water are mountains of gold and silver.”<sup>11</sup> This has become the golden rule of today’s “Rural Revitalization” movement in China. The natural landscape (*shanshui*) is no longer a secluded place for the ancient literati, but is now an attraction swarmed by contemporary tourists, and a grand carnival setting for holiday consumption. In order to find the next popular destination, online video channels send drones to capture the undiscovered wilderness and isolated villages, and to photograph star-architect-designed homesteads (bed & breakfasts) in the mountains. Here the eyes represented by aerial photography are the eyes of capital. The rivers and mountains hunted by drones, and edited by video-makers, are neither “nature” nor “landscape,” but rather what Guy Debord called “spectacle.” They are as attractive as the pinup girls in the shopping center windows. The commentary on these videos describes “spending a night in the mountains” as an emotional act of consumption, which can contribute to the local economy and engage you in voluntarily paying more for your room than you would for a five-star hotel in the city in order to fulfill your sense of moral satisfaction. Investment in B&Bs has become a craze for local governments to encourage and for consumers to pay for, while architects describe the commissioned building projects in the countryside with phrases like “rural reconstruction” and earn sufficient attention on social media. In fact, all of this is the mixed-up result of the spillover of real estate capital after it has exhausted urban land reserves, the outbreak of the middle-class “anti-urbanization” tendency, and the government’s determination to solve the problem of rural depression. The countryside suddenly appeared as a “newly” found “virgin land” for capital, but its income has nothing to do with peasants. Peasants may be able to work as waiters or sell some local specialties here and there, but the bulk of the B&B economy is not for the benefit of the peasants.

This is why the countryside seems to be full of surging hot money while the peasants remain poor. Peter Kropotkin answered a similar question in *The Conquest of Bread*: Why are there still large numbers of poor people in a capitalist

society with such advanced production technology and rich social wealth? Because the outcomes of workers' production are not intended for self-sufficiency, but for trading and making profits for capitalists.<sup>12</sup> If "rural architecture" is regarded as kind of production of space, its most fundamental characteristic is self-use. For thousands of years, this style of architecture has followed the life needs of villagers. Like plants growing from soil, these buildings can continuously "grow" new space when family size increases. This is a very different architecture than identical apartments in the city that are "planned" and "designed" to regulate people's lives. The original meaning of "bed & breakfast" is to share a spare room with tourists, but in China it has become part and parcel of hotel investment. Architects are invited to design B&Bs in the countryside, not for self-use by villagers, but for time-based sale to temporary visitors. So even if the buildings conform to the local style and emphasize "green" and "environmental protection," they cannot be regarded as "rural architecture" – not to mention those buildings that airdrop urban style into rural areas. Rural Studio is a commissioned architectural lab, but the users of their design projects are local residents in rural areas and there is no problem of "local user absence." The principle of "folk crafts" is the same. The handicrafts that peasants produce are all utensils and appliances that they use in their daily life. However, nowadays in China, they are collected by designers and converted into expensive luxury goods, which have become "artistic crafts" through which the middle class can demonstrate the so-called lifestyle choice of "returning to the basics."

Pig's Inn in Bishan is one of the earliest B&Bs in China. In the early 2000s, the poets Han Yu and Zheng Xiaoguang moved to the countryside and renovated old houses that had been abandoned by villagers. Because so many friends wanted to visit, they eventually had to accept payment from them. The reason I decided to move to Bishan in the first place was also related to my first experience in their houses: I fell in love with Hui-style architecture. Later, after setting up the "School of Tillers" in the village (a multiuse space for contemporary agrarianists), I also used it as a platform to sign up for an account on Airbnb to collect villagers' spare housing resources. We listed these resources under the "School of Tillers Researchers in Residence" program and began to accept people from all over the world to stay, with all the income going to the villagers. These villagers didn't have to invest any money in renovating their houses. Instead, they just needed to clean up their houses, take photos

directly according to their current situation, and upload them to Airbnb with our help. We indicated to the guests that there would be no services provided. When guests stayed in villagers' homes, they could eat with them and experience their most basic aspects of daily life. I regard these as real B&Bs. The guests enjoyed them, while the villagers could make income. Hui-style houses have many advantages, such as fire-proof horsehead walls, nature-friendly patios, temperature-regulating hollow brick walls, moisture-proof interlayer storage spaces, light-increasing roof windows, reasonable circulation drainage systems, etc., which are all worthwhile features for contemporary architects to learn. The local artisans who helped us renovate the old houses are very skilled, so I liked to cooperate with them on small, experimental projects, such as the thatched toilet hidden in the inner courtyard and the all-bamboo tea pavilion on the mountain. Their traditional skills are more than enough to cope with these unusual requirements.

At the beginning of the environmental movement in the 1960s, tribal dwellings, hand-made houses, and "vernacular architecture" were popular among hippie communes. Lloyd Kahn's *Shelter*, edited and published in 1973, collected a large number of such examples. It is one of my favorite books. For its part, Airbnb has brought different styles of traditional dwellings from all over the world into people's view, and has accelerated the opportunity to experience these living styles in person. At present, architects' interest in "nonurban" areas and their architectural practices in rural areas seem to be developing into a wave of "cosmopolitan vernacular." Today, the environmental movement is getting more and more deeply involved in politics. Of course, it has contributed to the growth of the Green Party as a political force from the 1970s, which continues to grow all over the world and seek political solutions to issues such as anti-capitalism and global warming. "Green" stands for nature. It was originally the pursuit of environmentalism, but its rival, capitalism, is also competing for "green." The spectrum of the world is becoming more and more complex. It is really a test of our vision.

**HHR:** I think this test of our vision is one of the biggest challenges we're facing today, and also for the future, because it is the starting point of self-awakening!

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Hou Hanru is the artistic director of the Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo (MAXXI) in Rome.

Ou Ning is the director of the documentaries *San Yuan Li* (2003) and *Meishi Street* (2006); chief curator of the Shenzhen & Hong Kong Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (2009); jury member of 8th Benesse Prize at 53rd Venice Biennale (2009); member of the Asian Art Council at the Guggenheim Museum (2011); founding chief editor of the literary journal *Chutzpah!* (2010-2014); founder of the Bishan Project (2011-2016); a visiting professor at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation (2016-2017); and a senior research fellow of the Center for Arts, Design, and Social Research in Boston (2019-2021).

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1  
Ou Ning, *Utopia in Practice: Bishan Project and Rural Reconstruction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

2  
Orange Wang, "China Food Security: Country Faces 'Grain Supply Gap of 130 Million Tonnes by 2025' as Rural Workforce Dwindles," *South China Morning Post*, August 18, 2020 <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3097781/china-food-security-count-ry-faces-grain-supply-gap-13-0>.

3  
Saneatsu Mushanokōji founded the first *Atarashiki-mura* in Takajo, Miyazaki Prefecture, in 1918. It was flooded by the construction of a reservoir, so it was moved to Moroyama, Saitama Prefecture in 1939. The haiku poem on the memorial pole, in Japanese, is <https://www.saneatsu-museum.jp/en/activities/100th-anniversary/>. See *The Centenary of Atarashiki-mura: 1918–2018* (Saneatsu Mushanokōji Memorial Museum, 2018), 37.

4  
San Yuan Li is a traditional agrarian village located within urban Guangzhou. See also *San Yuan Li*, directed by Ou Ning and Cao Fei (dGenerate Films, 2003).

5  
James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

6  
Du Tao and Xiao Wei, "Urbanization of Migrant Workers Takes 1.8 Billion Yuan," *The Economic Observer*, May 11, 2013 <http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/20130510/230115425368.shtml>.

7  
See Erik Reece, *Utopia Drive: A Road Trip Through America's Most Radical Idea* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016); Chris Jennings, *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism* (Random House, 2016); and Ellen Wayland-Smith, *Oneida: From Free Love Utopia to the Well-Set Table* (Picador, 2016).

8  
See James Yen's speech at a reception for Chengdu alumni of the China Institute of Rural Reconstruction (1985), in *Complete Works of James Yen*, vol. 3, ed. Song Enrong (Tianjin Education Press, 2013), 519.

9  
Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Counterpoint, 1996), 97.

10  
This is the curatorial statement for a section in the coming exhibition "A Story for the Future" at the MAXXI, Rome. Not published yet.

11  
Xi Jinping's slogan, in Chinese, is <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2013-06/25/c14924287.htm>, or alternatively <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2013-06/25/c14924287.htm> (two mountain theory). It has also been called "Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization." He first mentioned the slogan during a 2005 tour of Anji County in Zhejiang Province, while he was serving as its Party Committee Secretary. See "Green Is Gold: China's Remarkable Revival Project," United Nations Environment Programme, September 26, 2018 <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/green-gold-chinas-remarkable-revival-project>.

12  
Peter Kropotkin, *La Conquête du Pain*, first published in 1892. In English: *The Conquest of Bread* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), 17. Available online at the Anarchist Library <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-the-conquest-of-bread#toc4>.