Are Rural Villages Stages in the Theatre of Urban Tourism?

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Any examination of rural and ethnic tourism, in China or elsewhere, builds upon a long tradition of the theory and practice of urban-rural relationships. The unrelenting and complex relation of the countryside and the city – started with food and raw material production, as well as labour and potential spouses. The Welsh Marxist sociologist Raymond Williams in his famous *The Country and the City* (1973) showed that for Europe at least, the countryside has been exploited by the rulers and the city 1) for food, materials, labour etc. and 2) as a “counter-mythology” - a lifestyle of simplicity and harmony, as opposed to the exploitation and competition of cities.

Recently, the renowned Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas (2017), wrote a fairly dystopic vision of the future of the countryside in relation to cities. He sees ever more scientific, robotized, satellite mapped and planned farming, incoming populations of alienated urbanites, with disadvantaged minorities and refugees doing the dirty work, all under the peril of harsher climates and global warming.
What, then, shall we say about these assertions? Though villagers may show initiative and resilience, it is the forces of the city which ultimately both plan and implement rural development and which analyze and reinforce the ideologies of urban-rural relationships. Following Raymond Williams’ “counter-mythology,” we know that most Chinese city dwellers feel their family originally came from the countryside. For many, their (family) origin, their home town/village was in a rural area. “Back home in the countryside, my home town/village, where I came from, origin” is expressed as 故乡 gu xiang = home town, home land, or jia xiang 家乡 which younger people use, all related to 湘村, 乡村 xiang cun implying village life, simple, rustic, or uncouth. These popular phrases and feelings are commonly used to attract tourists to rural destinations, as in “Come to your dream hometown" in Wuyuan (婺源), Jiangxi Province.

Hometown tourism and city/rural relations have been expressed in recent times, three ways, each in increasing order of “fantasy.” This follows almost exactly Japanese 故郷 Furusato (home town, village, birthplace) Tourism which developed as Japan rapidly urbanized 1950-70s (Graburn 1996; Ivy 1995)
Stages of Hometown ("roots") Tourism

1. Going home to see family, to see friends and to see the places you knew when you were young. Such as at New Year holiday or other holiday times. (the earliest, original, nostalgic kind of "roots tourism")

2. Going to country places/villages which "seem like" the places you or your parents knew when you/they were young. A general nostalgia for "harmony, community, slow life" resulting from alienation from the city life - fast, competitive, expensive.

3. Ideally all places where people live should be harmonious communities, so efforts are made even in urban communities in foster a sense of relationships, mutual help, getting to know neighbours. This is an attempt to balance or "correct" the features of city living that produce alienation. But this probably applies to the middle classes who no longer have strong connections to the peasant countryside.

"Urban Villages"

This counter trend to make cities more like villages – the urban village movement – through the creation of sub-urban areas, and within English cities since 1980s (Franklin & Tate 1980), has taken many forms in China. These are not to be confused with isolated communities of poverty found inside many wealthy cities such as Shenzen and Dongguan. But even these are starting gentrification and a heritage boom in their struggles for survival and respect (Oakes 2018). Different again are villages urbanized and transformed by tourism (Zhang Jinfu 2017).
Ethnic Tourism, Villages and Development

After 1978, closing the gap between minority *minzu* and Han has focused on poverty alleviation through education and wage labor. Prime has been the promotion of domestic tourism to rural areas where ethnic “difference” is maintained through traditional performances, ironically often reviving formerly banned cultural forms, involving “religious” and “spiritual” events and objects.

But many village developments do not involve tourism. For his BuYi village in Guizhou, all traffic in and out is on foot. To visit might be “adventure tourism.”

But the government installed electricity and clean water. Pigs are kept under the house, and carried to market in baskets.

The pig’s manure is collected to make gas and piped up into the house for cooking.
Ethnic Village Tourism – two types.
1). Traditional “Authentic” Rural Villages
2). Nong Jia Le - 农家乐 Commercial Rural Villages

The first is favored by anthropologists, NGOs and foreign advisors, emphasizes the preservation of “authentic” material and performative culture while developing the lives of those still in ‘traditional’ villages.

Here young Miao women of Langde village welcome the official group with rice wine, while the men play music in the background.

When not “on show”, the Maio family dresses the same as the Han tourists.
For Tourists Performance and Participation are key elements:
Dancing and music around the ladder/tree of life in Langde village
Professor Peng pounds the sticky rice in Nanhua village, to be eaten by tourists!

Miao food is cooked and served in a restaurant in a house in Maomaohe

Rice fields feed the Miao
Rural Destinations and Local People.
All rural destinations, “scenic spots” need and attract local people, both as service personnel and as folkloric attractions themselves.

Jinzhongshan Valley, near Guilin, with karst mountains and caves employs the local “peasants” for their colourful farms and their services.

The State Farm as a “scenic Spot” in the Hani and Yi Prefecture of Yunnan.
Mile East-Wind State Farm absorbed five villages, and joined the Yunnan Red Winery (云南红) in 1999. Set in spectacular landscape, the vineyards and the wine tasting became a big tourism attraction. Some of the Axi workers became guides and entertainers, adding an “ethnic” touch to the place. They dress up and perform, and modified their music into drinking songs in a mixture of the Yi and Chinese languages. Tourism fosters creativity!
Mixed Ethnic and Scenic Villages.

Ping’an, on the Longji terraces, Guangxi, is a hive of activity and commercialism with hotels, restaurants, song and dance entertainments - run by (a) local Zhuang-tzu, (b) immigrant Han from the coasts, and (c) other minority minzu who come for the business.
Sani peoples in Shilin, the Stone Forest, Yunnan

The ‘Stone Forest’ Shilin is a top Scenic Spot for urban Chinese, a UNESCO natural heritage site in Yunnan. The unique rock features are the main attraction, but within the park there are people who have come from nearby villages.

Many of these people, mainly women, wear distinctive clothing that identifies them as local Sani minzu. They sell souvenirs and snacks, offer to take photos, and some of them are guides, like the one with Dr. Shi Yanlan here. I asked her how much Sani language she spoke at home – but she kept silent – Yanlan explained she was actually Han, married to a Sani! So is this ethnic tourism?
2). The Commoditization of Rural Hospitality

Many economically successful tourism developments involve rural peoples providing services such as food, drink and accommodation for urban tourists. Examples include the Yao fruit farmers in Gong Chen County, Guangxi. The area attracts tourists from Guilin, Yangshuo and the Li River especially in spring when the fruit trees bloom and outdoor concerts held under the trees for the picnicking audiences (Chio 2013, 2014).

Hong Yan Ecological Village, consists of small hotels on the riverfront, built by Yao farmers with materials bought by the county, in a contract with farmers in the old Yao village.
The family lives on the ground floor. The wife does the cooking and the family and the guests eat in one large room. Each “hotel” is also a small store selling cold drinks and snacks. With many weekends full, and profits from sales and take out meals too, some of the families were able to pay back the 14,400 Yuan that the county paid for the building materials in one season! But the hotels belonged to the village and the families only leased them.
The two upper floors each contain two guest rooms, each with two beds and a TV. When the housewife got too busy she called on her sisters or friends in the village to help, so the income was shared among many women in the village.

When not pruning or picking the fruit trees, the men took tourists on bamboo raft trips along the river. Often the wife would cook the meal and the guests eat it while rafting.

Though very successful, the tourists were not introduced to Yao “ethnic culture.” It may have even led to language and cultural loss, in exchange for commercial proficiency.
The Construction of “Imitation Villages”

The creation of “urban middle class” neo-villages has taken many forms. Near Hangzhou, the Liangzhu community, created by China Wanke Co. has its own ethics, rules and even a “religion”, promoting solidarity, respect for nature and slow lifestyles.

Outside of Shanghai, the Moganshan village resort outside Shanghai embraces comfortable rural living, where urbanites can enjoy nature, and boast of a European lifestyle. More specialized and perhaps functionally authentic is the Wutong Mountain Arts Village near Shenzhen, where the pace and scenery encourage traditional artists and fashionable clothing designers.
“Neo-villages” are more like urban fantasies: New Village near Guilin

Foreign or Disney fantasies: Swiss Village and Cloud Lake Village, Guizhou
Tourism and Village Development as Creativity

Lastly I would like to draw attention to Anji County, Zhejiang Province, and its award-winning “Garden villages” and amazing “Ecomuseum” system of one city and over forty rural and industrial “community museums.” (Graburn & Jin 2017). Here equal respect is granted to agriculture and industrial products, leather puppet performances and fan-making, local arts, dances, architecture, local history, famous people, the Party, and the Army victory over the implacable Japanese enemy!

Villages
Conclusion: “Let a thousand flowers bloom” refers to the “Hundred Flowers Movement” Mao Zedong 1956-57. While Mao encouraged experiments in industry and agriculture, he imposed strict collectivization on rural villages. Since then, rural tourism development has been one of the most experimental in China. We know from many research reports that there is no one top-down policy for tourism villages. While we can see a uniform tendency for investment and commercialization, we are also witnessing a kind of mass competition through “cultural capitalism” with the invention of new forms of culture and heritage, under the guise of tradition, at the behest of urban culture, as Williams suggested. Rem Koolhaas was partially correct in predicting the flow of alienated city people to a “fantasy countryside,” but he failed to see the exuberant creativity and the wild variety of “neo-traditions” that are emerging!
Thank you. I would be happy to answer your questions.