

A NEW CULTURAL ECOLOGY?

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A NUMBER OF CHINESE ARTISTS and academics are seeking the answers to a suite of related environmental issues, including overzealous urbanisation, food safety, sustainable development, and cultural heritage preservation, in a renewed engagement with the Chinese countryside. Since the mid-2000s in particular, this new ‘ruralist movement’ 农村运动, has sparked over two hundred initiatives in the field of rural reconstruction, or literally, ‘village construction’ 乡村建设 (sometimes abbreviated as 乡建).

Perhaps the best known of these initiatives, outside of China anyway, is the Bishan Commune 璧山共同体 in Bishan Village, Yi County, Anhui province 安徽省黟县璧山. The commune is led by the writer, curator, and film maker Ou Ning 欧宁, and his friend,

fellow curator and educator Zuo Jing 左靖. In 2011, the pair began by organizing the ‘Harvestival’ 碧山丰年庆, a festival of music, poetry, film workshops, and local performers. While participants also came from elsewhere, they invited the whole village to attend. That year Ou decided to move there from Beijing with his family, renovating a traditional farmhouse to live in.



Ou Ning

Source: blog.163.com

While most other rural reconstruction projects try to reinvigorate the locality through economic and social enterprises, in Bishan, Ou, Zuo and a growing network of collaborators from China and abroad focussed on art and culture. The project saw the conversion of a disused ancestral hall into a bookshop and café, operated by Nanjing's Librarie Avant-Garde bookshop 先锋书店; the opening of modest 'rural-chic' guesthouses, and the launch of commune-branded stationery and apparel devised by designer-collaborators as a means of securing ongoing funding as well as creating a marketable identity. As Ou has explained: 'Since the 1970s many [rural] people have moved to urban areas and a lot of villages are now

empty—there are only old people and children. There is no public life and so what we did is to try to bring [in] more artistic and cultural events for the villages'.

In 2012, Ou and Zuo launched the stylishly designed *Bishan* journal, which publishes articles, photo essays, and a wide range of other material connecting the project to modern precedents, complemented by related texts and images about art, agriculture, and architecture in China and overseas. In June 2015, Denmark's Ovo Press published Ou's own notebook on the development of Bishan under the title *Bishan Commune: How to Start your Own Rural Utopia*, together with an English translation, in which Ou characterises Bishan as under the banner of 'Ruralism + Anarchism'.

Some articles in the *Bishan* journal have highlighted the pioneering efforts of earlier generations of Chinese intellectuals who have engaged with rural reform. Issue 2, on the theme of 'Back to the Countryside', reprinted a 2001 lecture by literary historian Qian Liqun 钱理群 that describes how successive generations of modern Chinese intellectuals have engaged in rural reform. For Qian, the first generation, active in the 1920s, was that



Bishan logo

Source: facebook.com



Ou Ning's notebooks

Source: catalystreview.net

of the May Fourth Movement, including writer Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (brother of Lu Xun 鲁迅), rural educator Yan Yangchu 晏阳初, and philosopher Liang Shumin 梁漱溟. The second consisted of the early Communists and ‘rural reconstructionists’ 乡村建设派 of the 1930s; the third the Yan’an era youth of the 1940s; and the fourth, the generation of post-1949 intellectuals who actively participated in the collectivist policies of the 1950s and 1960s. Qian sees the fifth generation as the ‘educated youth’ 知识青年 who went (or were sent) ‘down to the countryside’ to learn from the peasantry during the Cultural Revolution, a generation that includes Qian himself. This genealogy writes recent projects like Bishan into

an intellectual narrative that is not necessarily at odds with official history.

Tension has always existed between the visions of urban intellectuals for a re-invigorated countryside and what farmers or villagers in the countryside want for themselves, which is often straightforward economic and infrastructural development. Yet projects such as Bishan, despite involving some degree of urban idealisation of traditional village life, are also critical of contemporary trends in rural and ethnic tourism that turn villages into ticketed theme parks, forcing villagers to ‘act’ as themselves, everyday—such as has happened in the nearby towns of Xidi and Hongcun, both UNESCO listed ‘Ancient Towns



Bishan

Source: cdn2.gbtimes.com

of Southern Anhui', since 2000, and which receive bus loads of day-trippers from nearby Huangshan.

In China, as in other industrialising economies since the nineteenth century, urbanites may entertain a yearning for a lost or imagined rustic past, which they believe they can find in less economically developed areas, particularly those where there are 'authentic' and 'minority' cultures. Such rural nostalgia tends to affirm their urban middle-class status and values, which might be expressed as a taste for rustic or ethnic food experiences, such as 'farmhouse joy' 农家乐 restaurants, commonly marketed as serving more local, 'traditional', environmentally friendly fare, or 'ethnic' music. So, while new cultural initiatives like Bishan may benefit from the interest of middle-class urbanites, who are happy to sip espresso and browse for-

eign books in the Anhui countryside, this potential contradiction, or perhaps compromise, has not been lost on Bishan's founders.

Middle-class urbanites with rustic aspirations are now just as likely, for example, to indulge in ostentatious tea connoisseurship involving expensive teas and tea-making and serving accoutrements, including rare imported items from Taiwan and Japan. Some have taken to wearing faux-ancient *hanfu* 汉服 'Chinese' clothing that manages to simultaneously suggest aesthetic sophistication, patriotism and opulence, while being less outwardly extravagant—and therefore politically safer—than such things as designer watches, French red wines, and Italian sports cars.

At the same time, independent rural reconstruction initiatives, and the culture they both symbolise and foster,

appear to be in step with such government policies as the anti-corruption and pro-austerity campaigns as well as Xi's call for 'art and media workers' to spend time in rural areas (directly recalling Mao's lecture in May 1942 at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art), and even the demand that intellectuals and others be on guard against 'Western influences'. However, because they tend to be driven by urban academics and creative communities, with a suspicious cohort of collaborating foreign institutions and individuals, such initiatives risk being perceived as a subversive critique of the central government's failure in rural communities, particularly since party-state policies, especially under Xi, leave scant room for autonomous zones of culture. Therefore, while many initially court local government support, they always face the risk of censure or co-option. Many initiatives, however, are in fact affiliated to university-based research labs or individual professors, and so are already directly linked to an arm of government.

No less significant a challenge is the need to navigate the expectations of locals, including cadres and other government officials, whose main incentive in such intellectual and cul-



Hanfu 'Chinese' clothing movement
Source: en.wikipedia.org

tural experiments is their potential to raise local incomes and create employment without attracting undue attention from the centre.

STOP PRESS:

Increasingly in Xi's China there is a price to pay for international recognition: on 2 May 2016, several foreign media outlets reported that nervous Party cadres shut down parts of the Bishan commune's water and electricity supply. At the time of publication, Ou had gone quiet.

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