

‘BEAUTIFUL CHINA’ PROJECT: A DEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL FOR NON- HERITAGE RURAL AREAS IN NORTH CHINA

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Abstract: The ‘Beautiful China’ project originated from the Chinese central government for the purpose of correcting the imbalance between urban and rural areas. In response to this national policy, numerous positive village development projects focus on improving the tourism potential of the Hebei province, North China. Because most of these rural areas lack historical heritage and infrastructure to support tourism, a well-directed architecture and landscape design initiative was organized by local governments. This is to create new types of livable, humanized, high standard and attractive villages through good design. A village project in Xinglong is examined, where development was strongly connected with tradition, and methods initiated to develop village tourism. In this way, the direction of the village construction can be shown and further developed and the revival of rural areas can be realized.

Keywords: Non-heritage zone, Rural development, Livability, Humanization, Tourism

1. Introduction

1.1. Project background

In order to coordinate a unified development of urban and rural areas, provide ecological protection and improve living standards, the central government of China has increasingly regarded rural development as an important issue [1], [2]. In 2015, Xinglong County was brought into the ring of the capital’s economic circle, and its influence was greatly promoted. As a result of Beijing’s massive consumer market,

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tourism has become the main economic development strategy, which heavily relies on the superior natural resources of the country side. Currently, widespread rural areas are involved in this strategy and numerous projects are being constructed, pointing at tourism which has become the main driver for local development.

1.2. Profile of Chinese villages

Chinese civilization is based on agriculture; this means that, the vast rural areas are the foundation of China. For thousands of years, the development of villages could be treated as a continuation of local traditional architectural features and a reflection of the harmonious relationship between villages and their surrounding environments. However, because of large-scale urbanization in the late twentieth Century, a large number of traditional ancient villages vanished with devastating effects. According to statistics from the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of China and State Administration of Cultural Heritage, in 2014, the number of villages, which retained abundant cultural relics, great historical values, traditional features and local ethnic characteristics was extremely low [3], [4]. After this evolution over thousands of years, the traditional rural aesthetic had suddenly disappeared, to be replaced by an inferior representation of hastily built, low cost constructions [5].

As a result of the restriction of physical and spiritual conditions, for instance economy, external culture, religious belief and morality, a cultural fracture has emerged throughout a majority of Chinese villages, which have become non-cultural heritage areas. For this reason, the development strategy for these kinds of villages has become a primary objective for rural construction in China. In the past twenty to thirty years, most traditional ancient villages in Xinglong have gone through an uncontrolled renovation and only a few traditional villages and ancient buildings with cultural protection value are left. Xinglong, in this respect, is a typical non-heritage rural area.

1.3. Profile of Chinese village tourism

In China, Nongjiale is the most popular form of rural tourism [6], [7], and involves city dwellers driving to villages independently or as part of a group and staying at a residence, experiencing rural life and eating local cuisine. For most villagers who have a desire to operate a tourism business in the future, village hotel management is the easiest and most reliable way. In addition, local governments are also willing to develop village Bed and Breakfast hotel (B&B) as well. Consequently, as an important provider of rural tourism, the development of village hostel buildings is a specified target of rural construction. The sustainability of rural tourism is directly affected by the quality of buildings constructed.

2. Design methodologies

2.1. Analysis of village condition

The investigation of the current village situation is the basis for a series of follow-up construction tasks. For this reason, the design team carried out numerous surveys in the

villages over several weeks. The information collected as part of a longer term survey included, the basic layouts, distribution forms and street scale of the villages; the plans, structures, materials and condition of the residence; and further information about other infrastructure present (*Fig. 1*). Based on the comprehensive data surveyed, the existing advantages and disadvantages of villages were shown. In addition, the ideal direction for village tourism development could be made while taking into consideration the tradition heritage already present.



Fig. 1. The typical view of local village

In the field of village site planning. Adjoining neighbors with a common wall is the traditional type of housing. Several residence form a row of residential unit in the east-west extension with a two to three meter street between different rows. The streets are essential elements for the purpose of traffic and communication. The traditional village layout is intensive usage of land, avoiding excessive waste of a limited resource. Moreover, in the long winter season, this layout is also beneficial for thermal energy sharing and storage, which saves energy.

In the field of architecture design. In Xinglong, traditional dwellings with high solid walls are the basic units. There is an emphasis on privacy, which means that usually there are no openings towards the outside. Owing to the long and cold winter, the high walls also have the function of resisting the cold wind, so that the courtyard is independent and closed. The main building has a south-facing sloped roof and an east-west extension facade in order to maximize solar gain. Additional rooms are always built to store tools and grains. The private but spacious courtyards are mostly managed as vegetable gardens or with livestock to support the families; during the autumn, they are used as drying areas; nowadays, parking for vehicles is an additional function. With an increase in the family numbers and the facilities, an increasing number of two or three storey residences have been built over the last decade. Generally, the residences are arranged to meet the order of agricultural production, with low wastage of space. What deserves special mention is that in many villages, it is difficult to meet the

requirements of modern tourism due to the large number of newly constructed residences with crude form and poor structures.

In the field of landscape design. Xinglong has superior natural resources with vast mountains and a large number of rivers. However, large areas of agroforestry land lacks of planning, and agricultural facilities with different shapes and scale stick out in rural land; the river areas lack professional planning, and there are few built structures like as walkways are constructed along the rivers. As a whole, there is an absence of landscape elements (for instance lighting, benches and signage) to help integration between agroforestry land and residential areas.

2.2. SWOT analysis of local tourism

Strengths, superior location; convenient access; abundant resources [8].

Weaknesses, tourism resource under-exploitation; inadequate tourism infrastructure; regressive tourism management; insufficient external investment; deficiency of heritage buildings; low quality residences.

Opportunities, national policy support; financial support; intense residents' desires; massive potential market.

Threats, effect of similar industry from Beijing suburbs; seasonality of demand; tightened national land policy; undeveloped road status.

2.3. Aesthetic popularization education

This 'Beautiful C' project in Xinglong was organized by the Hebei provincial government and implemented by Xinglong local government, village collectives and local inhabitants. Most of the participants, from the governmental officials to the village inhabitants, are not professionals in the field of architecture design. Although they have glorious expectations for the project, these people do not have enough professional experience and sensitivity to manage the specific operation process and to evaluate the aesthetic standards, due to limitations in their knowledge and a lack of information. In order to communicate smoothly with the participants, lectures about architecture and aesthetics were given, through collaboration between the Architecture Design Institute of China Central Academy of Fine Arts and government representatives (*Fig. 2*). After the classes, these three levels of participants could express their ideas more clearly, and understand the design concepts better. It was a solid foundation for the subsequent design and construction process [9].

2.4. Survey questionnaires

In order to properly meet the needs of the members of the community, the design team reached out to the members of the villages. Survey questionnaires were sent in order to be able to identify and understand their perception about the proposed project. With the assistance from the local village collective, one hundred and twenty eight

questionnaires were issued and all of them were recovered, of which one hundred and twenty six were valid. By using this technique, the research team received important information for the design. Among them were opinions about the governmental program, the proposed village industry, and the urgent upgrade needed, the expected financial investment, architecture style and the interpretation of the connection between local tradition and present-day development.



Fig. 2. Communications between the design team and local committee

2.5. Architecture classification

The design team carried out a detailed investigation to classify the buildings inside the project area. The classification included the structural integrity, the appearance of morphological characteristics and different property rights. The village houses were categorized into three categories: preservation, renovation or demolition of the structures. These surveys help to determine the requirements for tourism and help further development is drawn up while respecting the original village layout, settlement texture, architectural rhythm and form [10]. A variety of multiple, flexible concepts need to be considered according to specific diversity of economic situations, habits, business and aesthetics among each family instead of applying a homogenized approach.

3. Proposed recommendations

In pace with the change of life style, transportation system, and living environment, the original spatial pattern and inner space organization structure of traditional villages

do not reach the needs of new economic transformation. Therefore, to improve tourism, it is an important issue to figure out how to sensibly connect rural constructions and relevant regulations of urbanization; how to construct new village buildings with modern technology and safety standards; and how to present the historical, cultural, geographical and economic value of the original village [11].

There are a large number of detailed laws and regulations to ensure the safety and standard of constructions in the city. On the other hand, building standards are seriously deficient in most rural areas, which cause the chaos in rural development. Accordingly, urban guidelines were introduced into the system of village remodeling and a construction guide to play a positive role in the continuation and protection of the historical and cultural features of the villages. This system is based on the features of the villages, for instance, the entire layout, settlement texture, spatial arrangement and typical forms, which are reflections of local history, characteristics and tradition. It is an integration of design elements to regulate the further planned direction.

On the basis of the target made by the local government and the expectation of the villagers, a new type of village which is livable, dynamic, attractive and can be quickly implemented became the objective of this project. This would improve the rural living conditions and boost the community's economy. Modern comfortable life is the dream of villagers and they consider the renewal of their villages to be the most convenient option to achieve modern living standards. The promotion of increased living conditions is an important factor to attract attention from outside and is the most persuasive advertisement for tourism.

For this project, as described above, in the site plan, the requirements include safety, unimpeded traffic and conservation of land-use; in the field of architecture design, demand would focus on solid structures, reasonable function, modest price, simple construction techniques, comfortable environment and developed form. Meanwhile, comprehensive arrangements should be implemented for different aspects of courtyard combinations, street connections, pavements, construction materials, building colors, architectural decoration, component structures, municipal facilities, shop signs, information signs, street furniture, agroforestry land and river banks [12], [13], [14].

3.1. Site plan of new residential area

Under the homestead replacement principle, and depending on the number of farmers participating in the project, the corresponding scale of land will be developed and unified as a community with professional tourism services. The compact layout of the original village will be retained, keeping the spatial sequence consisting of village entrance and streets (main streets, minor streets and alleyways). With coordination among the local fire protection code, green requirements and industrial zoning, it is hoped that a harmonious community will result. Proposed index is shown in *Table I*.

There are few public facilities in the original villages to meet the diverse needs of the villagers in daily life, let alone potential tourists. In order to solve this problem, comprehensive facilities will be set up with flexible functions, simultaneously, to reach the demands of villagers and tourists alike (*Fig. 3*).

Table I

Proposed index for the new residential area

Object	Number	Unit
New Residential Area	14932.08	Square Meter
Gross Floor Area	7918.11	Square Meter
Covered Area	4886.08	Square Meter
Green Area	5172.25	Square Meter
Plot Ratio	0.53	
Building Coverage Ratio	33%	
Greening Rate	35%	
Parking	62	Piece
Bus Parking	2	Piece
Car Parking	60	Piece
Residential Building	22	Family



Fig. 3. The completed complex building in Guojiashuang village

3.2. Architecture design of new residence

After extensive planning, a variety of multiple, flexible concepts were considered depending on the economic situation, habits, businesses and aesthetics for each family instead using a standardized 'one size fits all' approach.

In order to achieve the goal of organic development, the original layout of the courtyard would be preserved including the main gate, high wall, courtyard, main building and side building. After considering numerous materials, forms, colors, proportions and structures; the planning for the future development, the optimal 'prototype' would be integrated. Four basic designs were provided for villagers (Fig. 4).

Each type of residences has a distinct function and form but combining the forms could be achieved between each design and random distribution could be carried out

specific to the site plan. It would be feasible to create a new community with rich spatial sequence and identification.



Fig. 4. Proposed residential buildings

With the exception of functional integration and visual improvement, as the basis of the project, the design team focused on innovative structures and sustainable energy use. It would be a great possibility to improve the quality of rural buildings, which traditionally have poor heat insulation [15]. This would make the winter season more appealing to tourists and attract more of them in the off season.

3.3. Refurbishment

The idea of the refurbishment is consistent with the new construction buildings. The purpose of this task was to promote the visual impression of the village by renovating the main facade of the village buildings. Therefore, according to deadline and budget, the design team divided the task into three priorities. First, design for the main front elevation of houses and walls along the main road; second, concepts for the exterior of buildings inside the courtyards and the arrangement for the yards; third, completion of the remaining facades (Fig. 5).

To reduce cost, the design team managed to achieve a balance between using traditional materials, crafts and modern forms. These plans should relate to the inhabitants daily life with certain functions, such as combining the function of the wall with storage. It is not only a functional enclosing wall with additional uses, but also provides decoration and makes up the appearance of the village.

For the villagers who were reluctant to relocate to the new community, preferring to operate B&B hotels from their original houses, the design team proposed, after extensive communication, that they concentrate on the interior space with a few transformations to improve the space utilization and fulfill the requirements for the future (Fig. 6).

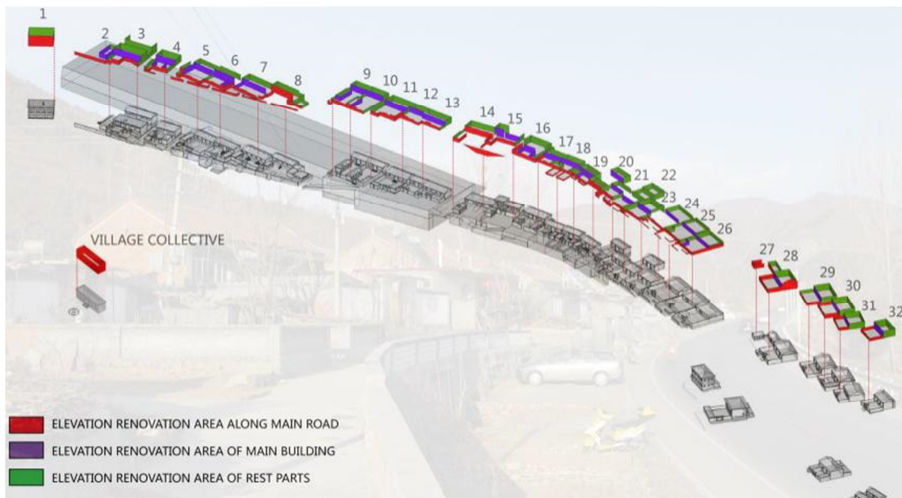


Fig. 5. The three stages of refurbishment



Fig. 6. The transformed residence

3.4. Interior recommendations

The detailed interior design proposal will eventually be completed according to the economic conditions and preferences of different families, for this reason the design team did not make a unified plan. However, in order to ensure the high quality completion of the project, many recommendations and principles were provided.

Building components and recycling from demolished houses was suggested, along with the creative organization of future interior furnishings; local handicrafts were recommended indoors to create a unique atmosphere [10]; relevant facilities should be arranged with regard to the traditional customs and behavior of the village inhabitants. The preserving traditional customs serves to make a village more attractive to tourists. As a precondition for inheriting the traditional essence of the buildings, modern concepts and regional features could be integrated to form a unique innovative life style which is still based on local cultures [16], [17].

3.5. Landscape recommendations

In order to reduce the effect of the development on the local agricultural and forestry production, the design team proposed to arrange the present fields with small scale, inconspicuous and functional landscape features. In the fields, the jumbled agricultural facilities would re-emerge as landscape components. This would not only be an improvement of the visual effect of the agroforestry land, but also could symbolize the boundaries of various farmlands belonging to different families. The rivers and river banks would be regulated and several wooden foot bridges would be built. The landscape facilities inside the project site would be integrated to connect the village as an entirety. Meanwhile, it is emphasized that the new landscape facilities should play a variety of functions during the four different seasons to enhance the potential of village tourism management throughout the year.

4. Conclusion

The past never returns. Nevertheless, significant references from the past could be rediscovered in the field of architecture design. History is a process of dynamic development. Vernacular architecture of different periods and regions always represents and adapts to human demands and lifestyle. Through different times, there should be various strategies for village development. Based on history and culture, the target is to match the current demands with the relevant sustainable development in rural areas. While preserving traditions, heritage and culture and taking into consideration modern demands a strategy of organic integration between modern and historical elements could be created which changes as required over time.

The 'Beautiful China' project is a comprehensive and highly coordinated practical project, including architecture, agriculture, economics, ecology, sociology and many other disciplines and fields. The village project in Xinglong, which the author participated in, is dominantly the work of architects who aimed to integrate a scattered and chaotic rural resource and seek innovative elements to support tourism development in the future.

The study of rural development strategy is a long-term continuous process. It is around one and half years since the beginning of the project, and the construction is under preparation. Communication between the local government and the design team is ongoing to refine the developing procedure connections with the municipal utilities are still working to negotiate the municipal pipe networks. More research achievements and

renewed concepts will be accomplished with further study of villages and wider cooperation with foreign colleagues. As a result, Xinglong will be created as a landmark of new style Chinese villages with the optimal organization and the conformance of development, reviving the vitality of the villages within its borders.

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