

PLACE-BOUND RELATIONSHIP: THE MISSING COMPONENTS IN THE NEW SOCIALIST COUNTRYSIDE ¹

Wei Zhao¹

¹University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah

ABSTRACT: In 2006, China's central authority released a new policy calling for "Building a New Socialist Countryside." This policy embraces a set of ideas that aim to boost modern agriculture, increase rural affluence, advance infrastructure construction, and improve public services and democracy. The local practice, however, turns this broad concept into a ground up rebuilding of a new countryside where rows of identical apartment buildings rapidly emerge in rural China. Meanwhile, rural residents are relocated to new settlements and historical and vernacular houses are demolished. Using Yanxia village in Zhejiang Province as a case study, this paper examines the local deployment of this policy. Drawing upon archival research and ethnographic fieldwork, this paper argues that the newly constructed settlement fails to provide a satisfactory home environment for the local residents because of its detachment from the existing cultural landscape. This detachment fundamentally breaches the place-bound relationship between the residents and the vernacular settlement, which is essential in constructing the meaning of home for residents of Yanxia.

KEYWORDS: Home, Vernacular Architecture, Tradition, Modern Development, Rural China

INTRODUCTION

In February 2006, China's central authority released a new policy that called for "Building a New Socialist Countryside," which became the base for an ongoing political and social movement in rural China. This document identifies a broad set of economic and social goals that are highlighted in its official slogan: agricultural development, affluent life, civil society, clean and ordered built environment, and regulated democracy. These five goals are carefully laid out in a hierarchical order. The first and foremost goal of the policy is to boost modern agricultural development. It then focuses on the farmers, including improving their living standard and welfare; finally, it touches upon the built environment. Nevertheless, this document does not advocate the necessity nor the importance of building a new rural environment. However, the underlying intent of this policy has been misinterpreted by some Chinese scholars, who advocate creating a "clean and ordered built environment" as the key in constructing a new socialist countryside (Li 2006; Yang et al. 2009; Liu, Cheng, and Zhang 2009; Liu and Zhuang 2009). Specifically, Qiu (2006) argues that creating a clean and ordered built environment is the foundation for the other four goals, because a clean and ordered built environment is the prerequisite for agricultural development, the essence for affluent life, the medium to realize a civil society, and the physical carrier for democratic practices. Supported by scholarly arguments, constructing a "clean and ordered built environment" gradually became the priority of the local deployment of this policy, especially after 2008 when the overall political context in China started to focus on housing, land transfers, and urbanization (Looney 2015). As a result, newly planned settlements with rows of nearly identical houses or apartment buildings that are detached from the existing cultural landscape have rapidly emerged in rural China since 2006. Meanwhile, rural residents are forced to move out of the vernacular settlements that have been their homes for generations.

Using Yanxia village in Zhejiang Province as a case study, this paper examines the local deployment of the policy of "Building a New Socialist Countryside." Through examining the planning and the design of the new settlement, this paper argues that the newly constructed settlement, although claims to provide a better residential environment such as a larger living area and indoor plumbing, fails to become a satisfactory home environment for the local residents because of its detachment from the cultural landscape of Yanxia. This detachment fundamentally breaches the *place-bound* relationship between the residents and their vernacular settlement, which is essential in constructing the meaning of *home* for residents of Yanxia (Zhao 2015).

This paper draws upon archival research and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in three phases between 2007 and 2016. The first phase, between 2007 and 2008, focused on the history and cultural traditions of Yanxia. The second phase, between 2010 and 2015, focused on the meaning of *home* as understood by residents of Yanxia. During this phase of the research, single-use cameras were distributed to the participants, who were asked to photograph meaningful aspects of their homes. This process was followed by semi-structured and in-depth interviews focusing on the contents of the photographs. The third phase of the research was carried out in October 2016, which followed up with the participants on their living conditions and collected some basic data regarding the new settlement.

1.0 LOCATING YANXIA

Yanxia, a small settlement of about 2,000 residents, is located in the middle of Zhejiang Province and is about 350 kilometers to the south of Shanghai. The Cheng family moved to Yanxia in the middle of the fourteenth century and soon turned this once multi-family settlement into a lineage-based settlement with many collectively owned public spaces, including ancestral halls, ponds, and open spaces (Zhao 2015). These public spaces were the center for social activities and cultural performances, through which the bond among members of the lineage were strengthened and the intimate social relations among residents were built. In the 1850s, members of the Cheng family started hosting pilgrims, who came from afar during the pilgrimage season to worship the local deity that was enshrined on the top of Fangyan Mountain, the rocky landscape located at the western side of Yanxia. Since then, this family-based hospitality business provided the major source of income for most of the residents. Meanwhile, residents developed a strong attachment to the local deity and the cultural landscape that nurtured this religious practice.

In 2006, the local government of Yanxia announced the plan to relocate all residents to new settlement area as a way to *clean up* the vernacular build environment. This plan received great resistance from the local residents (Zhao 2013). It was not until the end of 2014 that residents finally started to slowly move out. Meanwhile, some residents started to construct their new houses, in the style of four- or five-story townhouse, in the new settlement that is a few kilometers away from Yanxia. As of October 2016, while the new settlement was still under construction (Fig. 1), Yanxia was largely razed to the ground with a few remaining families struggling to live their lives (Fig. 2).



Figure 1: The new settlement as being constructed in October 2016. Photo by the author.



Figure 2: A few residents still struggled to live in Yanxia as of October 2016. Photo by the author.

2.0 THE VERNACULAR PLACE AND THE MEANING OF HOME

In addition to being a contextual, relational, and cultural construct (Appadurai 1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Massey 1994; Rodman 2003), vernacular *place* covers what Rapoport (2005, 20) defines as the “system of settings,” within which daily activities take place outside the physical boundary of a house and at locations collectively shared by all residents, such as the places to get water. In addition, Fei (1992) argues that lineage-based vernacular settlements in rural China are highly socialized spaces and rests on social relations established upon consanguineous coordinates. In addition, the consanguinity is also a social force that not only stabilizes and sustains rural societies, but also results in an attachment to *place*.

Based on this understanding of *place* and certain aspects of Chinese culture, Zhao's (2015) dissertation argues that the meaning of *home*, as it is understood by residents in Yanxia, goes *beyond* the physical boundary of house or the legal boundary of homestead and is attached to cultural traditions recognized by the local residents. These traditions include the lineage structure and its associated kinship affairs established in the early fourteenth century, family-based economic practices started in the 1850s, and, most importantly, the *land* in which their residential spaces have been situated for generations.

This understanding of home is well illustrated in the case of participant C23 as shown in Figure 3. This diagram illustrates the locations and perspectives of the 16 (out of a total of 27) photographs that participant C23 took outside the boundary of the courtyard house he shared with his sister's family. In addition to these 16 photographs, four photographs participant C23 took inside the courtyard house focused on objects and sceneries directly associated with local cultural traditions. Overall, 49 percent of all 610 identifiable photographs focused on things outside the physical boundary of the homestead and on traditions that were either treasured by an individual family or collectively shared by all the residents of Yanxia (Zhao 2015).

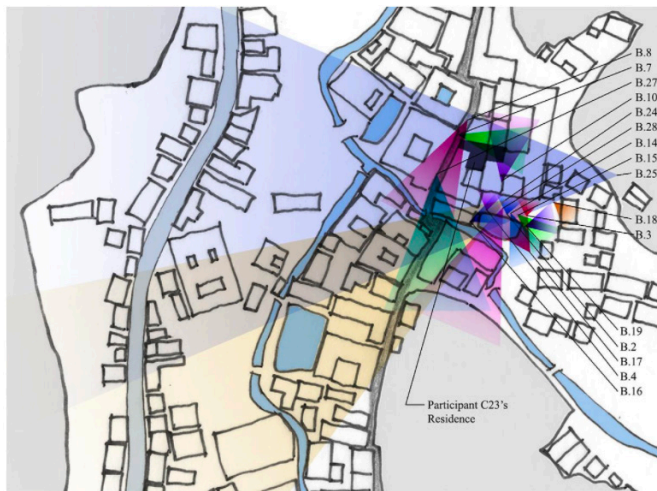


Figure 3: The locations and perspectives of the 16 (out of a total of 27) photographs participant C23 took outside the boundary of the courtyard house he shared with his sister's family. The numbers on the right side indicate the sequence in which those photographs were taken. Drawing by the author.

As the most important set of traditions in constructing the meaning of *home* for residents of Yanxia, the *place-bound* relationship can be best illustrated through participant C25's words:

At our place here, we have the mountains, have the water, have the land, and I have my private plot. If I move down there, won't I then become a city dweller, who can only eat? The water from the mountains is very good, and it is free. There are not even any ponds down there. How could I wash my clothes? How could I live my life? And they say that it will be better than my present life?

Participant C25's comments contains four messages. First of all, he felt a strong *place-bound* relationship to his village, Yanxia, which provided fundamental resources for living, such as water and firewood, land to grow grains and vegetables, and ponds to do laundry. Secondly, this *place-bound* relationship was the means by which he identified himself, as well as other residents living in Yanxia and even the entire population living in rural China, as being different from city dwellers, who, in his view, were detached from the *land* and the raw materials and could only enjoy the finished and final products. In addition, he did not want to lose his identity and live like a city dweller where the living environment would require what he considered a fundamentally different lifestyle. Lastly, the *better* lifestyle defined by the local government officials and professionally trained planners and architects was quite different from the desired rural lifestyle described by participant C25. In other words, participant 25 did not yet accept the new identity associated with the lifestyle of city dwellers or acknowledge its compatibility with who he was.

3.0 THE MISSING COMPONENTS IN THE NEW SETTLEMENT

The new settlement is located a few kilometers outside the valley in which Yanxia is located; it used to be a large piece of agricultural land belonged to villages of the surrounding area. The local government acquired the land and turned it into the new settlement for Yanxia and other seven villages, as well as the site for the new government building.

Since the new settlement is still in construction, an in-depth study on whether or how the new settlement, as part of the new socialist countryside, affects people's lives and their understandings of home cannot be carried out yet. However, a few findings can be revealed from examining the planning and the design of the new settlement with the understanding of the *place-bound* relationship in constructing the meaning of home for residents of Yanxia. The following analysis focus on the role of public space, the importance of lineage structure, the sense of ownership, and the economic challenges.

3.1. The Lack of Integrated Public Space

The vernacular built environment of Yanxia was integrated with collectively owned buildings, such as ancestral halls and the ancestral house named Degeng-Ju, and various kinds of open spaces, including ponds, creeks, small plazas, and even private courtyards (Fig. 4). These spaces, easily accessible by the residents, acted as a large and shared living space, where daily activities, social interactions, and cultural performances took place. The availability of shared public space is a fundamental difference between rural vernacular landscape and urban built environment. In addition, these integrated open and accessible spaces also nurtured a close social relation between neighbors. As summarized by participant C34 when he compared his life experiences living in Yanxia and the nearby city, "In the city, you close the door immediately

after you enter the door!” In other words, these open spaces and the public places were the core of an extended nexus that connected all the adjacent homes with open doors (Fig. 5). As a result, the residents living in those homes formed an intimate social relationship that crossed the boundaries of homestead and family.

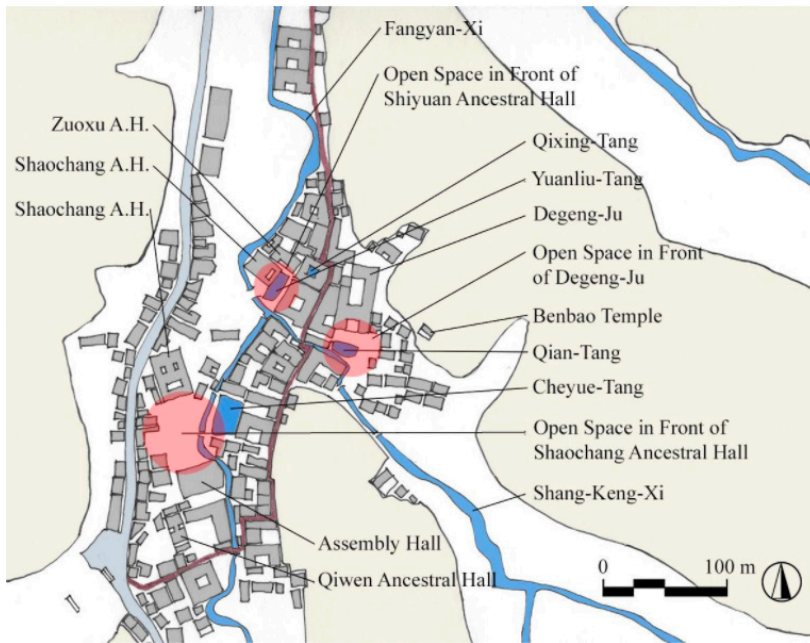


Figure 4: The southern section of Yanxia with the indication of all the open spaces and collectively owned buildings (“A.H.” stands for Ancestral Hall. “Xi” means brook. “Tang” means pond). Drawing by the author.



Figure 5: Residents were socializing at the open space in front of Degeng-Ju. Photo by the author.

In comparison, the new settlement is modelled after development projects of urban China and is not integrated with the kinds of open spaces or collectively owned buildings that served local residents as in Yanxia (Fig 6). Designed to prioritize automobile transportation, the new settlement is dominated by wide and straight driveways. As a result, the buildings, as well as the little patch of green space, are surrounded and defined by driveways and parking spaces. In contrast to the extended nexus of open spaces in Yanxia, this extended network of driveways seem to hinder the interactions, as well as the establishment of social relations, between neighbors (Fig 7).



Figure 6: The billboard outside the new settlement showing the rendering of the area (the buildings enclosed by the semi-circular road are not part of the new settlement). Photo by the author.

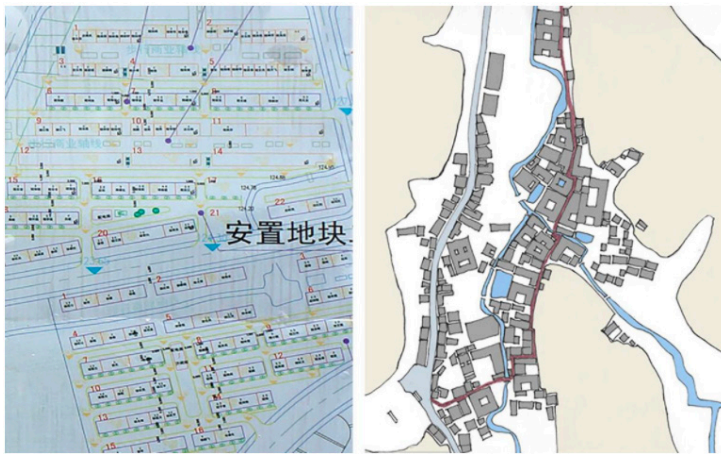


Figure 7: The comparison between the plans of Yanxia and the new settlement in the same scale. The image of the new settlement was a photographic copy of the plan exhibited in the display case inside the new settlement. Photo by the author.

3.2. The Breakdown of Lineage Structure

Cohen (2005) argues that the examination of any matters of social life in rural China needs to be based on the understanding of lineage structure and kinship affairs. As a lineage-based settlement, the built environment of Yanxia evolved and grew as the lineage proliferated. The lineage not only organized ritual activities throughout the year, which continually strengthened the lineage and the bond among family members, but also helped its members in times of difficulty. Participant C3's personal story demonstrated the importance of lineage in rural China. His family, who were not descendants of the Cheng lineage, used to be a well-established family in Yanxia running a very successful family-hotel in the early twentieth century. However, after a fire destroying the building, his family collapsed financially and then physically. Without the help from the lineage, they could not rebuild the building nor find an alternative way to make a living. To survive, they had to give up one of their sons, participant C3, and let an older single male from the Cheng family to adopt him, so the family could become associated with the Cheng family and then have a place to live with the help of the lineage.

In comparison, the new settlement was designed without the consideration of the role and the importance of lineage in rural China. Not only was it designed to have no integrated spaces that support kinship affairs, the new settlement also dismantled the existing lineage structure. During the relocation process, the residents from eight villages were assigned the locations of their new houses through a lottery system. In other words, the members of the Cheng family, as well as residents from other lineage-based settlements, are dispersed throughout the entire settlement and away from each other. As participant C29 believes: "the breaking down the existing bond within the lineage enabled the local government to do their jobs."

3.3. The Loss of Sense of Ownership

Land ownership in China is a limited concept in the way that the *complete* ownership is dissected into three segments. These are legally defined ownership, use rights, and the rights of ultimate disposition, which, in most cases, belong to farmers of the same village collectively, the individual farmer and their families, and the government respectively (Yan 2014). In the case of Yanxia, all residents collectively owned all the land, while an individual or a family had the use rights to a specific piece of land for the purposes of constructing a house or farming. As a lineage-based settlement, when most of the residents belonged to the Cheng lineage, collective ownership and lineage ownership large overlapped. In addition, according to Fei (1992), the concept of *family* in Chinese culture has a flexible boundary and an extended family can be as large as the entire lineage. Therefore, in the case of Yanxia, this overlapping blurred the distinctions between what was my property, what was your property, and what were our properties; it also enabled residents to have a strong sense of ownership towards things they collectively owned, which helped strengthen the *place*-bound relationship. As participant C20 expressed her concern about moving to the new settlement, "If I go there, everything belongs to others. Even if I walk a little bit, the road belongs to others! In my village, we own everything together. Even if they build the house for me, I won't feel I own it."

In contrast, the local government owns the land underneath the new settlement, while individuals or family only have the use rights to the lot where they build their new houses. This new model assigns the legally defined land ownership and use rights to different entities. Without having the land ownership, the sense of ownership residents have towards their new houses weakened. Without this sense of ownership, the meaning of *home* will start to crumble. As participant C33 believed, "neither a golden nest nor a silver nest is as good as my own muddy nest." Participant C16 expressed a similar feeling, "it is hard to say which style of housing is good, which style of housing is worse. The best is the one that belongs to you!"

3.4. The Economic Challenges

As explained earlier, this family-based hospitality business had been the major source of income for most of the residents living in Yanxia. The emergence of this economic practice was due to Yanxia's unique location: at the end of the pilgrim path and the foot of Fangyan Mountain. In other words, this practice was deeply rooted in *place* and was an essential part of the local cultural landscape. However, being away from the pilgrim path and the temple, the location of the new settlement can no longer supports such economic practice. In addition, as part of the rural lifestyle as described by participant C25 and quoted in section 2.0, when living in Yanxia, most residents grew vegetables in their private plots, did laundry and washed vegetable in the ponds, and collected firewood from the mountains. All these *place*-bound activities helped to lower the cost of living dramatically. In contrast, living in the new settlement as urban dwellers requires residents to pay for all their food and utilities. As participant C39 described, "if I move to the new house, I will start to spend money from the moment I wake up, because I have to pay for the water to flush the toilet." When considering both factors, one can understand the reason for the strong resistance from the residents regarding for the relocation plan, because, for most residents, moving to the new settlement means not only leaving the home environment that their ancestor established in the fourteenth century, but also having unbearable economic challenges for the family.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental issue in the planning and the design of the new settlement for Yanxia, as well as for other seven villages, is its detachment from the local cultural landscape—the *place*—in which residents' homes were rooted and nurtured. This detachment destructs the *place*-bound relationship between residents and the vernacular environment that their family had been living for centuries. Specifically, the new settlement is designed without integrated public spaces and collectively shared buildings that can serve as the center for daily activities, social interactions, and cultural performances. Instead of trying to maintain and protect the existing social relations within the lineage, the relocation process breaks down the intimate bond between neighbors and family members by scattering them throughout a large area. In addition, the division between the legally defined land ownership and the use rights for the residential buildings in the settlement diminishes the sense of ownership that residents have towards their new houses. Finally, the relocation causes many residents losing their way of living, which was the family-based hospitality business rooted in the place that marked the end of the pilgrim path. With the high cost of living in the new settlement, e.g. unable to continue agricultural practice and higher utility bills, residents will face great economic challenges after they move into the new settlement. Overall, the breaching of the *place*-bound relationship weakens the meaning of *home* as it was understood by residents of Yanxia. In other words, although providing *better* and *modern* houses judging from local government and design professionals' perspective, the new settlement might fail to become a satisfactory home environment for the local residents.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 This paper is largely based on my dissertation that was completed in May 2015 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with the guidance of Professor Lynne Dearborn, Professor John Stallmeyer, Professor Helaine Silverman, and Professor Carla Santos. The title of the dissertation is "Home Beyond the House: The Meaning of Home for People Living in Yanxia Village, Zhejiang Province, China."