

A Dreamland or the Land of Broken Dreams: Juxtaposed Conceptions of the Good Life in Heyang

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China's rural villages, many of which are undergoing a great transformation from their communitarian past toward their fractured present, are significant sites of heightened inequalities unleashed during the reform era. Under the predominance of reproduced mythologies of rustic ideal, alternative conceptions of the good life derived from rural China remain largely disguised, marginalized and under studied. Following the ritual view of communication, this article examines the emergence, coexistence, and interplays of four distinctive conceptions of the good life in Heyang Village, a rural frontier that epitomizes the intensifying commodification of the countryside. By situating these juxtaposed conceptions within the transforming social relations of rural China, it is trying to unveil the hidden power struggles in the past and present countryside and to manifest the complexities of contemporary Chinese rural issues. In the end, this article concludes with a reflection on the conceptual significance of "the good life" for critical communication scholarship.

Keywords: good life, urban–rural relation, uneven development, rural cultural industry, communitarian tradition, ritual view of communication, rural China

"The good life" has always been a crucial issue for communication scholarship, although under many circumstances it is wrapped within other, more overarching, appealing, or tangible concepts, such as development, progress, modernization, solidarity, inclusiveness, and accessibility. Tracing the origin of the term, as Armand Mattelart (1996) pointed out, the opposite of communication—*excommunication*—is defined (by Diderot in his *Encyclopedia*) as the separation or exclusion from a society or a body that the subject has previously enjoyed living in, which clearly suggests an indissoluble bond between communication and the good life. Not surprisingly, when Everett Rogers (1969), Daniel Lerner (1958), and Wilbur Schramm (1964) contributed to the establishment of modern communication scholarship, their primary purpose was claimed to be helping the poor and powerless in the developing areas to achieve the good life. For instance, Everett Rogers (1969) described the essential task of communication scholars as to assist the rural communities of less developed countries to avoid the "grinding disequilibrium occur[red] as a result of racing human fertility, famine, and frustration" (p. 222). Following the same line of thoughts, Wilbur Schramm (1964) also defined the role of mass communication as to make the rural populace "aware of a need which is not satisfied by present customs and behavior" and hence to help them "invent

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or borrow behavior that comes closer to meeting the need" (p. 115). This emphasis on the issues of the good life has been well inherited by contemporary communication studies, such as the proliferating debates and discussions around digital divide (e.g., Castells, 2000; Compaine, 2001), e-Democracy (e.g., Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Tsagarousianou, Tambini, & Bryan, 1998), and ICT4D (e.g., Kenny, 2006; Unwin, 2009).

However, as manifested in the above cases, studies addressing communication and the good life have long been confined to the transmission model of communication, thereby reducing the research subject into issues like information access, information overload, information security, media literacy, media mobility, and mediated connectivity. Exemplified by the Call for Participation of the 2014 International Communication Association preconference, "Communication and 'The Good Life' Around the World After Two Decades of the Digital Divide," contemporary communication studies are still predominantly focusing on the "transformative changes" that ICTs will bring to people's life, and arbitrarily defining the lack of quality access to emergent communication technologies as "antithetical to the nature of a 'good life'" (International Communication Association, 2014, para. 3). In contrast, this research will follow the ritual view of communication, which conceives communication as "sharing," "participation," "fellowship," and "the possession of a common faith" (Carey, 2009, p. 15), and thus address the good life as a sociocultural construct, the conception of which is created, shared, modified, and transformed through various communicative processes.

This article will first critique the long-lasting romanticization of the countryside as the "container" of the good life within the socially produced landscapes of capitalism. After a brief introduction to the commodification, consumption, and "indoctrination" of rural nostalgia in contemporary China, key questions of the research will be presented as follows: whether rural China is following the same trajectory, becoming a spectacle of nostalgia, and what alternative conceptions of the good life it might offer to resist or counterattack the hegemonic rural idyll tailored by urban-centric consciousness. The methodological section will then illustrate the research design of the two-week fieldwork in Heyang, a mountainous village on the east coast of China, as an integral part of the "From Global to Village: Grounding Communication Research" project (Zhao, this Special Section). Based on the research findings in Heyang, the emergence, coexistence, and interplays of four different conceptions of the good life will be thoroughly discussed and contextualized within the transforming social relations of the village. In the end, this article will conclude with a reflection on the conceptual significance of the good life for communication studies and the relevant tasks of critical communication scholars.

Hijacked Rurality: The Challenge of China?

Through the ages, the unprecedented development of the capitalist mode of production economically and geographically sets the city and the countryside apart while it contributes to the representation of urban-rural dichotomy as a cultural superstructure (Polanyi, 1944; Williams, 1973). Established environments, production processes and social organizations in the countryside are continually being modified, replaced, or abandoned with new built forms and new environments against the backdrop of a fundamentally urban-oriented society (Perkins, 2006; Wachsmuth, 2014). In the Western capitalist society, one of the major trajectories is the perpetual production of a hegemonic idyll, in which rurality

refers to the repository of all the good things lost in the processes of urbanization (Zhao, 2015; see also Meinig, 1979; Newby, 1979; Short, 2006).

Coupled with romantic sentiments toward the imagined rural geography, discontents and dystopian visions of urban living led to the long-cultivated habit of those with power and privilege to run as far from the "mean streets" of cities as possible (Harvey, 1996). And it was precisely the potential of profit making by selling this "out-in-nature" experience to urbanites that a whole "rural cultural industry" gradually grew up as a response, which in turn reproduced the mythologies of the rural ideal (Perkins, 2006; Short, 2006). More recently, various units of capital in conjunction with local governments have recreated preindustrial village landscapes and reproduced preindustrial commodities to appeal to the increasing consumer desire for the "authentic" good life in an imagined countryside (Harris, 2000; Mitchell, 1998; Mullin, 2001).

However, as Marx wrote in *Grundrisse* (1973), "It is as ridiculous to wish to return to that primitive abundance as it is to believe in the continuing necessity of its complete depletion" (p. 310). These romantic conceptions of rural life are manufactured in the city for the urbanites to dream of in popular culture, in Michal Bunce's (1994) terms "the armchair countryside." As a result, social realities of poverty and powerlessness in both the past and present countryside are excluded from this hegemonic rural idyll, while voices regarding what rural people really want and what problems they are facing remain belittled, suppressed, and even entirely silenced. No matter how paradoxical or ridiculous this hijacked rurality looks, just as Marx (1973) predicted, "The bourgeois view has never got beyond opposition to this romantic outlook and thus will be accompanied by it, as a legitimate antithesis, right up to its blessed end" (p. 310).

As being incorporated into the global capitalist system in an unprecedented pace, contemporary China is also witnessing similar processes taking place in its countryside. Embodied in a surge of rural tourism and reality television shows featuring the countryside as the place of the good life, rural China has been culturally appropriated and made into a spectacle of nostalgia (Zhao, 2015). The commodification, consumption, and indoctrainment¹ of rural nostalgia have constructed a particular conception of the good life, which centers on the romanticized countryside, "a space to redirect capital investment and to redirect domestic (urban) consumption, to potentially facilitate China's transition from an export-oriented to a consumption-driven economy" (Qian, 2016, p. 16). However, it is still too early to conclude that rural China will follow the same trajectory and become urban China's "backyard" with regard to the following factors: the huge population still living in the countryside, the exclusion of which for the creation of a scenic, "pure" imaginary is simply unrealistic; the long-lasting reciprocal relationship between city and country in ancient China as a significant source for contemporary social imaginary; the central role of peasantry and countryside within revolutions and reforms throughout the history of modern China; the hitherto unrevised constitutional definition of peasants and workers as the "masters" of the state and society; the continuation and development of grassroots democracy in rural China; and the numerous

¹ Linda Qian (2016) used the term *indoctrainment*, which was coined by Wanning Sun (2007), to describe a sense of deliberateness suggested in the Chinese Communist Party's thematic and rhetorical emphasis on nostalgia.

ongoing social movements emerging from the countryside (e.g., Day, 2013; Lin, 2013; Lu, 2010; Zhao, 2015; Zhao & Sha, 2015). Therefore, it becomes important to explore spaces of hope outside the luring and all-encroaching hegemonic idyll and to rediscover alternative imaginaries of the good life envisioned by the poor and the powerless in past and present rural China. In this regard, as an integral part of the From Global to Village: Grounding Communication Research project, this research presents an endeavor to listen carefully to the suppressed rural voices, to reveal the various problems hidden beneath the romantic constructions of rural China, to unfold the complexities of contemporary rural issues, and to critique the juxtaposed conceptions of the good life in the countryside.

Research Design and Methodology

Aiming to disclose the complexities of communication and cultural dimensions of rural transformation in contemporary China, Heyang—a village located in the poorer and more isolated mountainous region of the rich and globally integrated coastal Zhejiang province—was chosen by Professor Yuezhi Zhao as the site for a collective field research project, of which this article is an integral part (see Zhao, this Special Section). With its status as a national cultural heritage site and one of the 100 best preserved traditional Chinese villages, Heyang has been pushed to the forefront of the so-called rural cultural industry, which is driven by the “urban malaise” of the disillusioned city slickers, embodied in the commodification of the nostalgia toward the “vanished nobility” of rural life, and in turn reproducing the mythologies of rural idyll (see Qian, this Special Section). Under this urban-centric escapist framework, Heyang has been further romanticized through a variety of media representations, such as being featured in the 2015 CCTV Spring Festival Gala as an exemplary place of the good life. In this regard, at the crossroads of cultural revival and community restoration, Heyang presents a valuable case study to address the above-mentioned research questions and to ground communication studies in the rural settings of contemporary China.

Following the ritual view of communication, the field research strives to situate the data collection processes within the participants’ original social settings, which in the rural context indicates constant, dynamic, and quite often spontaneous interactions among rural residents. In this regard, focus-group discussion was chosen as the main research method and was combined with in-depth individual interviews as well as participant observation for further subtle findings.

As one of the 12 researchers who participated in the “From Global to Village: Grounding Communication Research” project (see Zhao, this Special Section), I teamed up with two other researchers for the focus group discussion. From July 4 to July 7, eight focus groups in total were scheduled in one of the ancestral halls in the village, Zhu Da Zong Ci, for its publicity, accessibility, and symbolic significance. Potential focus group participants were first identified through contacts with village leaders and elders and then further recruited during a public information session. The sampling process was designed with regard to the following variables: age, gender, education, income, and production team affiliation (as a legacy of the People’s Commune during the Maoist era, households in Heyang are still compartmentalized into 36 production teams). The focus group discussions lasted from two to three hours and were audio recorded. Apart from the “registered” participants, any other villager who was interested in participating in the focus-group discussions was free to join at any time, and it was quite often the

scenario that “unregistered” villagers would just drop by, sit down at the table, and join the discussion. In the end, a total of 94 people participating in the focus groups, including 58 male participants and 36 female participants.

Based on the established contacts with focus-group participants, snowball sampling was then used to recruit more respondents for in-depth individual interviews. Nine individual interviews were conducted in a semistructured way with 585 minutes of recording. Apart from scheduled focus groups and interviews, the researcher was also fully immersed in the everyday village life during the two weeks’ field research in Heyang. As being exposed to both mundane and exceptional sociocultural practices in the village, the researcher engaged in participant observation through all kinds of daily activities, such as strolling around the village after dinner, having meals with local families, chitchatting with farmers in the fields, and taking part in recreational activities (i.e., square dance, mahjong, ping-pong). In this regard, observation notes were taken every day for the “grounding” of research questions as well as the contextualization of the data collected through other means of the research.

“It is Better to Marry Into Heyang Than to Become a Queen”: The Appropriation of an Agrarian Mythology

Like many other Chinese villages, Heyang has been trying to reconfigure itself into a popular tourist destination over more than a decade through the preservation, reproduction, and recreation of antique village landscapes, heritage architectures, preindustrial domestic utensils, cultural traditions, and folk activities. Apart from the normal “gears” of a romanticized countryside—fresh air, clean water, and green mountains—Heyang’s major “selling points” include around 1,500 heritage houses, 15 ancestral halls, and six antique temples, all of which seem to be recounting the splendor of China’s agricultural civilization, the prosperous past of the village, and an almost forgotten path toward the good life. In this rural “theme park,” tourists are free to wander in and out of the numerous heritage architectures, watching the villager’s daily routines and ceremonial activities as “authentic” demonstrations of a simpler, romantic rural life. Worn-out rural tools, fabrics, and furniture that were once considered as “junk” are now unearthed and displayed proudly to cater to the popularly sentimental privileging of rural existence. Mottos, precepts, and traditions of rural households are introduced and promoted as containing wholesome values that manifest the nobility of rustic life. These attempts to satisfy tourists’ desire for an imagined, sanitized, and picturesque countryside appropriated and at the same time reproduced a mythology about ancient Heyang, according to which it was better to marry into Heyang than to become a queen. This agrarian mythology delivers a particular conception of the good life, in which rural life in Heyang was once defined as superior to royal life. Through appropriating this agrarian mythology and weaving it into the contemporary romantic image of the village, Heyang is thus constructed as a Shangri-La where the superiority of rural life has been well preserved for over a thousand years and a redemptive conception of the good life has been inherited alongside the various cultural heritages of the village (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The reproduced mythology of Heyang.

However, as Raymond Williams (1973) once pointed out, “defense of a vanishing countryside could become deeply confused with the defense of the old rural order” (p. 237). Geographically, local landscapes have long been described as 80% mountains, 10% rivers, and 10% farmland. In this regard, it is conspicuous that Heyang is definitely not a typical “land of abundance” suitable for agricultural development. Then how could it become a place of prosperity and well-being in the agrarian society of ancient China, which forcibly implemented the policy of physiocracy and the restrictions on commerce? If there was indeed a particular conception of the good life in ancient Heyang as described in the mythology, then it deserves to be problematized by questioning how this good life was achieved, whose good life it was, and whether it could be reproduced in a different historical or geographical context.

Concerning all these questions, the problematics of this so-called good life in ancient Heyang could be demonstrated from at least the following three perspectives. First, before the establishment of People’s Republic of China (PRC), Heyang had long been a village of landlords rather than a village of peasants. This village was founded by a feudal bureaucratic family, which fled from North China to the south to escape from the war during the late Tang Dynasty. In the Song and Yuan Dynasties, there were in total eight *jinshi*—persons who passed all the three levels of the imperial examination in ancient China—originating from this small mountainous village, which was quite a rare case throughout the entire Chinese

history. Astonished by this incredible achievement, Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, rewarded the village with a plaque and a pair of stone sculptures. In this regard, this long-lasting good life of Heyang was highly contingent on its close connection with the imperial court as well as its intensive exploitation on the surrounding villages of peasants. Second, those folklores about ancient Heyang only told the story of the landlords, from which the life of the peasants was entirely absent. The mythological proposition—"It is better to marry into Heyang than to become a queen" (Zhou & Zhang, 2011, p. 178)—described only where the girl was married into, but nothing about whom she was going to marry. Thus, Heyang was abstracted away from its concrete social relations, and thereby the severe class antagonism completely evaporated in this reification of the village. In this way, a hegemonic understanding of the good life was established, and the ideas of the ruling class about the good life became the ruling ideas. Last but not least, this particular conception of the good life was rooted in a rich and well-developed region of ancient China. Historically, Heyang belonged to the Jiang-Nan area, a geographical region immediately to the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. This area gradually became the economic center of ancient China since the late Tang Dynasty, attracting revenues from all over the country. As a result of the uneven development in ancient China, the living conditions of Heyang were much better than those peripheral or remote areas.

By disclosing the above problematics, it is apparent that the good life of ancient Heyang was largely the result of uneven regional development and class struggles at that historical moment, representing the superiority of landlord life in a wealthy area of ancient China. Therefore, within this appropriated conception of the good life, there is an unconscious justification of "the values and attachments of an unjust and arbitrary society" (Williams, 1973, p. 238). Moreover, the appropriation and reproduction of this agrarian mythology in contemporary Heyang also conflates the village's mystic, prosperous past with its present, which tends to hide not only poverty and powerlessness in the past but also disguise intravillage inequality at present. In this regard, the conception of the good life embedded in the mythology is, although being earnestly advocated by the rural cultural industry, unable to reflect the villager's own concerns and pursuits, thus becoming a "hanging garden" dislocated from the transforming social realities of contemporary Heyang.

Beneath the Hanging Garden: A Torn Village, Two Divergent Yearnings

Apart from striving to become a "model student" in the rural cultural industry, Heyang also epitomizes another banal feature of rural China in the reform era, which can be best captured by Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum in 1993 as to "let some people get rich first, both in the countryside and in the urban areas" (Shawki, 1997, para. 12). Through the implementation of the household responsibility system and the de-collectivization of rural economy, this Reaganite neoliberal "trickle-down economics" has rendered the fractured rural society incapable of protecting Chinese peasants from "the depredations of the market forces unleashed by the reforms" (Day, 2013, p. 10). Rural China is thus turned into a "treadmill" on which rural residents start to accumulate as much wealth as possible and fiercely compete with one another. In the case of Heyang, even the most blinded visitor could immediately recognize the huge disparity between the developed households and the underdeveloped ones by simply looking at where they live. In terms of living conditions, the village can be generally divided into two realms—one consists of neat, clean, and spacious apartments while the other comprises shabby, messy, and cramped

heritage houses—resulting in dramatically different life pursuits and ideals. Ironically, despite their distinctive conceptions of the good life, both developed and underdeveloped households share the same disillusionment about the recreated mythology of the rustic ideal, some of which even claim that “nowadays, no one would like to marry into Heyang” (Focus Group 1, July 4; Focus Group 4, July 5; Individual Respondent 1, June 29; Individual Respondent 5, July 8).

The majority of the underdeveloped families still live in the heritage houses—the main tourist attractions in this “rural theme park”—wearing their own “costumes” and performing their daily routines to entertain the tourists with the most “authentic” rurality (see Figure 2). However, during 15 years of tourism development, each one of these poor “figurants” has only received 100 Chinese yuan so far as their “payment” and a garbage can to remind them of the tourists’ expectation on a sanitized rural experience. Besides, since most of the heritage houses have already stood there for hundreds of years, issues of roof leaks, cracked walls, and sloping floors are omnipresent. Although renovations and repairs have been regularly scheduled for years, the situation is not getting better for many of the residents. On the one hand, alongside the decline of traditional architectural skills, very few carpenters and masons are skilled enough to restore the heritage houses to a good state of repair. On the other hand, more importantly, the regular renovation is merely a scheduled maintenance of the “exhibits” rather than a repair of the dwellings to provide the residents with sustainable and comfortable accommodation.

Therefore, to maintain the “oldness” of these heritage houses so as to perpetuate an authentic rustic image, the renovations are usually conducted with used materials, some of which are even rotten, broken, or out of shape. As a consequence, life in the heritage houses becomes an even more undesirable and “risky” experience for some residents. For example, after living in their own heritage house for more than 60 years, an old couple was completely unprepared for the sudden collapse of an entire wall shortly after its latest “renovation” (Individual Respondent 2, June 30). Moreover, according to the governmental regulations on the protection of cultural heritage, rural residents are prohibited to demolish the heritage houses for residential redevelopment. At the same time, these underdeveloped families are also incapable of finding new plots for building new houses because the village’s land reallocation scheme is still being held hostage by some villagers who refuse to give permission for the repurposing of their contracted farmland for construction use. Of course, given their economic status, purchasing commercial real estate in the nearby town is both beyond their capabilities and unrealistic—as they still need to have access to their land to make a living. Being both administratively prohibited from demolishing the old houses and economically prevented from moving away, they are literally “imprisoned” in the almost unlivable heritage houses, where 10 or more family members sharing one overcrowded house with only three bedrooms is quite often the scenario.



Figure 2. Life in the heritage houses.

Benefiting the least while suffering the most from the protection of heritage houses, the underdeveloped families start to call them “the houses of suffering.” In their own words, this “ancestral gift” has now become an “unbearable burden” that keeps weighing them down. Parents in these families tend to factor the housing issue into the “nonmarriageability” of their sons. “Today there is not a single girl who would like to share the bedroom with her parents-in-law after marriage,” said a middle-aged mother.

I am not able to prepare a wedding room for my son, and he has a deep grievance regarding this. Although he has not blamed me for that, I can still feel it and I am blaming myself for it. (Focus Group 6, July 6)

Another middle-aged woman seemed to be more pessimistic:

For the poor people like us, nowadays it is better to have a daughter than a son. If you had a daughter, she could at least marry to the cities and have a good life. On the contrary, if you had a son, he might be imprisoned in these heritage houses for his entire lifetime. (Focus Group 3, July 5)

The seriously limited living conditions thus quite often become the trigger of intergenerational or intercouple conflicts in the underdeveloped families. Under such circumstances, a collective yearning for stopping tourism development, demolishing heritage houses, and building new houses for the poor families becomes increasingly prominent. More and more households even start deliberately making their homes smelly, dirty, and messy: fleas proliferate in the kitchens and bedrooms, firewood scatters around the courtyard, and stinky puddles of water are sometimes so deep that tourists are unable to walk around (see Figure 3). By turning their own dwellings into a disgusting place to keep tourists away, these people hope that when tourism makes no profit the local government would no longer support the preservation of heritage houses and allow them to turn down the old houses for building new ones. In other words, they are trying to demolish the mythological conception of the good life constructed by the rural cultural industry for the purpose of realizing their own conception of the good life, a simple ideal best described by the famous Chinese poet Du Fu in the Tang dynasty: "If I could have mansions covering ten thousand miles, I'd house all the poor and powerless to make them beam with smiles" (Du & Owen, 2015, p. 40).



Figure 3. The messy scene of a village tourist site.

In sharp contrast, the developed families have more than simply broken the "shackles" of the heritage houses. When homeless villagers have no choice but to live in the deserted school buildings that belong to the village collective or sojourn in their relatives' houses, these rich families have already owned new mansions, well-furnished and decorated with gardens, rockeries, and fountains. Within these families, many young people choose to move into the city, only coming back to the village for vacation, while seniors prefer to stay at "home" to enjoy the rural idyll. An old male villager's response clarifies the reasons behind the seniors' choice:

Both my son and my daughter have got married and moved into metropolises. Although they often invite me to live with them, I simply cannot stay in the city for too long, at most a couple of weeks, because the urban environment is too crowded, noisy, unhealthy, and full of risks, such as the food safety issues. Moreover, you don't even know who live in your neighborhood at all, which is really unimaginable and unbearable. So it is still in the countryside that you can achieve the good life with healthy food, fresh air, clean water, beautiful natural landscape, and a strong sense of community. (Focus Group 1, July 4)

Unexpectedly, many millennials in the developed families also accept this conception of the good life. As a young female freelancer argued:

The city is the place to work, while the countryside is the place to live. The city is the place to earn money, while the country is the place to restore yourself. This year I spent half of the time traveling around different cities to do my business, and spent the rest half in the village to rest and enjoy the life. And I will continue to do that in the future. (Individual Respondent 1, June 29)

Although their conception of the good life is also situated in the countryside, it is definitely not the pastoral life depicted in the agrarian mythology, but rather a gentrified rural life remodeled after the aesthetics of urban middle class (see Figure 4). Instead of wearing austere coarse clothes, well-to-do women—in their favorite pastime of taking selfies in front of Heyang's iconic ancient dwellings—start to fetishize *qipao*, also known as the Mandarin gown, which was created in Shanghai in the 1920s and made fashionable by urban upper class women (see Figure 5). Instead of herding livestock in the fields, they are more used to drive luxury cars through the village's winding alleys, which are absolutely not made for an automobile. Thus, a magical realistic snapshot of the good life in Heyang is almost fleshed out with the mimicry of the urban standards of living. It is also quite conspicuous that they prefer to live in the well-furnished villas built either in the new "extension" of the village across the river or within the heritage dwelling complex itself before there was a ban on new constructions, rather than to stay back in the heritage houses. Seeing the smog of frustration, grievance, anger, and despair pervading the heritage households, a middle-aged woman was so proud of her "wise move":

I was so lucky and farseeing that I chose to move out of those heritage houses and build the new house when policies were not as strictly implemented as they are now. Otherwise, I would be also trapped in the House of Suffering, being stressful every single day. (Focus Group 3, July 5)

Living in the villas modeled after urban/suburban trends and decorated with commodified rural symbols, these developed households have apparently bought into the conspicuous consumer aesthetics and the "unreal, decorative simulation of rurality" (Salamon, 2006, p. 337) created by their urban middle class imitators (see also Goldman & Dickens, 1983). In this regard, their conception of the good life has been homogenized into a popular rural culture and reduced into mimicry of suburban aesthetics.



Figure 4. Life in a local villa.



Figure 5. When qipao "fever" met appropriated rurality.

**“The Common Good Is the True Good”:
Sustained Communitarian Traditions in a Fractured Rural Society**

As mentioned above, Heyang is witnessing an intense divergence in the reform era, both materially and culturally. On the one hand, the underdeveloped families “trapped” in the heritage houses are trying every possible means to get out of the current predicament and improve their living conditions. Even at the expense of turning their homes into “hell,” they desperately want to stop the tourism development and relieve the heavy burden on their shoulders. On the other hand, although the developed families do not buy into the romanticized pastoral way of living, the appropriated agrarian mythology and the whole rural cultural industry built on it do not go against their own interests. Instead, they see it as a promising way of “re-sourcing” the countryside and making profits for them. Therefore, the developed families tend to support the preservation of the heritage houses and the development of rural tourism by deliberately ignoring the sufferings of the underdeveloped households and even criticizing the latter as selfish or shortsighted. These conflictual views have further intensified the division between the developed and the underdeveloped.

Since most of the villagers in Heyang belong to the same clan, sharing the same bloodline, it is more heartbreaking to see them start blindly seeking personal interests at the expense of others, questioning each other in a suspicious manner, and forming rival factions as the consequence of jealousy and suspicion. Gradually, the toxic smog of distrust pervades the village. The rich are seen as greedy, selfish, and desperate for moneymaking while the poor are characterized as conservative small property owners when they resist the development of rural tourism. Within such an atmosphere, even those actions for acquiring living necessities, proclaiming social justice or protesting against inequalities are interpreted as purely selfish moves. For many of the villagers, it seems to be impossible to think beyond the logic of possessive individualism and material enrichment anymore. According to the Maoist dialectical understanding of peasantry (Mao, 1926, 1927), peasants could either act conservatively to protect their own interests as small property owners or support progressive actions as a powerful revolutionary force, depending on circumstances. In this regard, following the decollectivized and commercialized path of development, Heyang villagers’ identity as small property owners has been unprecedentedly reinforced. As a consequence, the original dream of a collective, cooperative, and harmonious life has become scattered in the current individualistic, chaotic and fractured Heyang. As depicted in the poetic lines of Walter Benjamin (2006):

A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of forces of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human life. (p. 83)

Under such circumstances, spaces of hope have been preserved with the suppressed but sustained socialist traditions in the countryside. During Mao’s era, Heyang, like many other Chinese villages, experienced a series of transformative processes, such as land reform, the cooperative movement, the establishment of village congress, the establishment of People’s Commune, and the socialist education movement (Howard, 1988). All of these have been woven into a particular narrative or

memory of that era, in which people's personal interests are so inextricably bound with each other that only by achieving the good life for the community as a whole can each single member of the community fulfill his or her own life pursuits. However, this communitarian conception of the good life has been heavily suppressed and marginalized by a historical revisionist narrative in the reform era, as if it has never existed as a tradition of this village.

During a discussion about the "traditional" ways of living a good life, a village elder started an unexpected quarrel with two middle-aged villagers. When the two were recounting how their ancestors achieved the good life by entering politics or running businesses, the old man suddenly brought up Mao's concept of the mass line and the idea that contributing to the common good is "not only a means of life, but life's prime want." Upon hearing this, the two middle-aged men tried to correct him by arguing that these socialist ideas were not traditions of the village. Facing these comments, the old man was immediately perplexed and confused:

I do not know why traditions have to be those from ancient times. Isn't the socialist tradition a tradition? Isn't the first 30 years of the PRC not part of the history that we should include in our discussion about the good life? I am not wrong because it is a path that we have all walked through. (Focus Group 7, July 7)

It is ironic that neglecting the socialist tradition itself has become a tradition of the village for imagining the good life. However, even being marginalized and suppressed, we can still find obvious traces of the sustained socialist traditions in the village. For instance, a middle-aged woman emotionally described her own journey of "rediscovering" the essence of the good life after she returned to the village:

I spent 30 years with my husband in Guangdong province running an aquaculture business. During those years, life was quite tough since what we were doing was such a risky business. At that time, we had only one thing in mind, that is, "money making," as if only money could lead us to the good life. About three years ago, when our business started to get better, my husband was all of sudden paralyzed in both legs. So I decided to give up the business and returned to the village with him. After we came back, in the first several months my husband was in such a bad situation that I had to stay with him for the whole day and even had no time to do the cooking. Fortunately, my lovely neighbors brought me home-cooked dishes every single day, but asked for nothing back. Even until now they still quite often bring me some vegetables grown in their own land. Therefore, although my husband is still paralyzed and not able to work anymore, life is not bad for me at all, but instead warm, pleasant, and promising. Now I no longer want to live for money, not only because I have to take care of my husband but also I feel that living in a united, friendly, and cooperative community is the real good life. (Individual Respondent 7, July 11)

As disclosed in the works of Georg Hegel and Karl Marx, marginalized or subordinate groups have a more comprehensive view and understanding of the world since marginalized people have to see both their own subordinate positions and the ruling perspectives (Hartsock, 1998; see also Harding, 2004). And

this is precisely why the suppressed communitarian thoughts are able to go beyond the local context, addressing struggles in various contexts and engaging with the suppressed, marginalized and belittled groups at regional, national, and even global levels. In this regard, it does not represent the cosmopolitan route to the global as imagined in Western modernity; instead, it engages with the global through, in Sassen's (2004) words, "the knowing multiplication of local practices" (p. 662). In other words, it represents a form of social imagination with global scope that comes from localities and networks of localities under the same suppressed situation. This was precisely embodied in an old villager's concern about the future of Heyang:

In order to solve the current problems in the village, we have to firstly identify who are the subjects of this ongoing so-called development and who are the real beneficiaries. And this is not something particular to our village. The divide within the village is just a miniature of the broader division and unevenness at national and global levels. From a single family or a village, you can always see traces of the broader trend of the country and the world. (Focus Group 1, July 4)

In this process, the villagers do not have to become cosmopolitans. They could remain "domestic and particularistic in their orientation" and "engaged with their households and local community struggles," but at the same time they are actually "participating in emergent global politics" (Sassen, 2004, p. 20). In this way, the domestic rural settings have been transformed into "microenvironments located on global circuits" (Sassen, 2005, p. 165). With this communitarian perspective, the scattered and individualistic imaginations of the good life could once again resonate with each other, and everyone's little dreams about the good life could be woven together into a shared belief—"the common good is the true good"—resulting in a mutually beneficial relationship between the individual and the society, the urban and the rural, as well as the local and the global.

Conclusion: Why Study the Meanings of Good Life?

Based on the above analysis, there are at least four different conceptions of the good life coexisting, interacting, and colliding with each other in present-day Heyang: a pastoral life depicted in an appropriated agrarian mythology; a revived traditional thought that emphasizes the private access to and control of land, dwellings, and livestock; a gentrified rural life modeled after the aesthetics and standards of urban middle class; and a communitarian conception of the good life that defines the common good as the true good. Concerning these juxtaposed conceptions of the good life in Heyang, it becomes quite conspicuous that a particular conception of the good life is firmly embedded in the corresponding social relations and embodies specific developmental goals and paths at individual, familial, community, and societal levels. Taking a multidimensional perspective, the conception of the good life is embodied in personal pursuits, family plans, community benefits, social norms, ethnic traditions, national developmental paths, and even the common fate of humanity. In this regard, it becomes a key ideological construct that has the potential to connect the micro-, meso-, macro- and metanarratives, affecting how separate individuals and households interact with each other and how they are connected to various imagined communities. Learning from the Heyang experience, it is apparent that an individualistic money-driven conception of the good life would only cause divergence, distrust, and suffering, whereas a holistic,

society-oriented conception of the good life could bring unity, solidarity, and a sense of fulfillment. Therefore, constructing and communicating a conception of the good life that corresponds to the sustained communitarian traditions is crucial for solving contemporary rural problems and building a “new socialist countryside” in China. In this regard, it is important for critical communication scholars to identify and analyze what conceptions of the good life the ruling elites are manufacturing and what alternatives the multitude are imagining so as to speak for the people and for the common good.

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