

CHANGING RURALITY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: DOUBLE COMMODIFICATION
OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines contemporary rural transformations in China. I suggest that a different spatial relationship among production, reproduction, and consumption is in the making, grafted onto the urban-rural divide. A different urban-rural relationship is also in the making, shaped by changing divisions and integrations of labor that go into production, reproduction, and consumption. I argue that these two processes are occurring through a double commodification of the countryside, which produces what I call “rural commodity” and “rural-as-commodity”. “Rural commodity” refers to the ways in which products of rural labor are absorbed into urban-centered accumulation processes. “Rural-as-commodity” refers to how rurality itself has become an object of desire and exchange. These two forms of commodity collaborate to transform the urban-rural division of labor in China to facilitate accumulation. I focus specifically on rural tourism and media representations of new rurality to illustrate how these two forms of commodification converge.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines contemporary rural transformations in China. I argue that a different spatial relationship among production, reproduction, and consumption is in the making, grafted onto the urban-rural divide. A different urban-rural relationship is also in the making, profoundly shaped by changing divisions and integrations of labor that go into production, reproduction, and consumption. Why and how these processes are happening are the subject of this thesis.

This introductory chapter lays the ground by offering an overview of the framework and the context I am operating in. The first section discusses the Marxist framework I generally adopt, with a focus on a few key terms that anchors my approach – production, reproduction, consumption, and commodification. The second section considers the relationship between urban and rural and, relatedly, between agriculture and capitalism in Marxist and Marxian-inflected political economy. This section elucidates the ways in which changing rurality is intricately tied to broader questions of capitalist accumulation and the transformations of spatial and social relations in China, and articulates the central argument of the thesis. The third section reviews the context of rural development and political economic restructuring in China. Finally, I offer a brief overview of methodology.

Production, Reproduction, Consumption, Commodification

These four terms are fundamental to not just Marxist but also general political economy. Even within the Marxist tradition, too much has been written and discussed about them to fit in this short introduction. Therefore, I will simply discuss here the ways I approach and understand these terms, and preview how they function in this thesis.

To Marx, production is the foundation for any society because it's the condition for sustaining biological and social life. The simplest form of production is the metabolic interaction between human and nature mediated by labor, through which humans produce use-values to be consumed by themselves and thus reproduce their biological and social life. However, production under capitalist social relations moves far beyond the simple production of immediately consumed use-values – instead, under capitalism labor produces surplus value to be

appropriated by capital. This surplus value is embodied in the form of commodities through the production process, and the capitalists exchange the commodities on the market to realize a profit, which they then invest back into the production process, which subsequently expands in scale.¹ This is the most abstract image of capitalist production that Marx offers. In this image, three other terms and their complex relation to production and amongst each other have already emerged. I am ultimately less concerned with ontological descriptions of these terms and more interested in the relationships between them.

The first set of relationship is between production and reproduction. Already embedded in the description of production above is the expanded reproduction of capital, i.e. accumulation. Whereas what Marx calls simple reproduction of capital is the productive consumption that sustains the continuity of capitalists, labor, and the capitalist production process, expanded reproduction of capital is the gradual augmentation in scale of the production process, and of value. Surplus value is not consumed but reinvested into the production process. In this sense, production and reproduction are the two engines that drive capital accumulation. There is, however, another sense of reproduction that later Marxist scholars, particularly Marxist feminists, developed in more detail, namely social reproduction. Social reproduction theory stems from a contradiction in the capitalist production processes: capitalists must suppress the reproductive necessity of labor as much as possible to extract more surplus value, but because they also rely on well-functioning labor power, they may cripple labor in an unsustainable way and thus cripple the continuous reproduction of capital as well. Marxist feminists in the 1970s-1980s theorized this in terms of the relationship between male productive labor and female domestic/reproductive labor. In the 21st century, social reproduction theory branched out from this focus on domestic labor as reproductive labor to encompass a series of other activities that go into life-making activities, which is integral to but not directly involved in producing surplus value. As Tithi Bhattacharya summarizes, the current “social reproduction theorists perceive the relation between labor dispensed to produce commodities and labor dispensed to produce people

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (London: Penguin Classics, 1976).

as part of the systemic totality of capitalism.”²Taking inspiration from social reproduction theory, I consider reproduction as the process whereby the production of surplus value is made feasible and the expanded reproduction of capital can continue without crisis. This understanding of production and reproduction offers a fruitful lens to view the changing relationship between the urban and rural in China. Specifically, I argue that the rural is asked to shoulder more – and new – reproductive functions to sustain capital accumulation in urban areas. The next subsection will explore this in greater detail.

The second set of relationship is between production and consumption. Production tended to receive more attention in political economic analysis until Fordism, as a paradigm linking mass production with mass consumption, became hegemonic in the U.S. and spread with globalization.³ In China, discourse about increasing consumption’s role in national economic development goes as far back as the Reform and Opening era, and even today the state is constantly on the lookout for new ways of increasing consumption. However, theoretically production and consumption are two sides of the same coin. The simplest form of productive labor, the metabolic exchange between human and nature, is aimed at producing use-value to be consumed. Simple reproduction of capital – the mere sustaining of capital and labor – involves consumption of life-sustaining use-values. Social reproduction, as well as the sense of reproduction that I adopt, are both facilitated by consumption. In this sense, consumption is always already productive. With the rise of mass media and subsequently digital technology, media theorists have also been at the forefront of theorizing consumptive production, which stipulates that the act of consumption itself produces surplus value.⁴ Therefore, in this thesis I see production and consumption as twin processes involved in capital accumulation. The intricate intertwining of production and consumption often takes on particular spatial characteristics, or in other words, the relationship between production and consumption produces distinct spatial

²Tithi Bhattacharya, “Introduction,” In *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 2.

³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: an Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

⁴ Brett Caraway, “Audience Labor in the New Media Environment: A Marxian Revisiting of the Audience Commodity,” *Media, culture & society* 33, no. 5 (2011): 693–708.

arrangement and practices. In China, therefore, changing relationship between production and consumption can be seen in the changing spatial relationship between urban and rural. I will also return to this in the next subsection.

This brings us to the final term of commodification, or the process of making commodity out of something that is not or has not always been a commodity. I generally accept the Marxist definition of commodity as something produced by human labor, has both a use-value and an exchange value, and is exchanged in a market. Use-value refers to the concrete form of the commodity (which may or may not be tangible) and, in its very name, suggests that this form is useful to humans in some ways. This usefulness is necessary for the commodity to be exchangeable. Exchange value, or the amount of congealed abstract labor that is often expressed in money form, underlies the exchangeability of the commodity as the latter can now be systematically evaluated in relation to other commodities. From this description it is not hard to see that a lot of social effort is needed to make a commodity. Arjun Appadurai has written on the “social lives” of commodities and highlighted how the social feature of “exchangeability”, which lies at the ontological core of commodities, is the result of politics.⁵ For instance, the use-value – or, put differently, the desirability – of something must be socially produced before it can become exchangeable. The market itself needs to be constructed for exchange to take place. Finally, the commodity needs to be absorbed into a scheme of evaluation – in other words, it needs to be made legible to consumers as something that’s “worth” its exchange value. Commodification thus refers to all these social processes.

Urban-Rural Relations and Agrarian Capitalism

Studies on rural China are extensive in scope. In the introduction to a special issue in *Journal of Agrarian Change* on rural transformation in China, Zhang, Oya and Ye provide a robust review of the English-language Chinese agrarian studies field since the Reform and Opening period⁶. In the 1980s, the success of rural industrialization via proliferating and

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1986).

⁶ Qian Forrest Zhang, Carlos Oya, and Jingzhong Ye, “Bringing agriculture back in: The central place of agrarian change in rural China studies,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15, no. 3 (2015): 299–313, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12115>

prosperous township and village enterprises (TVE) attracted much attention, resulting in the foundational interpretation of rural development in China centered on local state corporatism.⁷ The bankruptcies of TVEs, central state fiscal reforms, and the rise in competitiveness of urban industrial capital in the 1990s quickly put an end to the rural prosperity of the 1980s, augmenting an already massive rural-to-urban migration. Studies from 1990s to early 2000s took up the issue of the predatory local state and mass migration, and examined rural resistances and hardships⁸ as well as exclusion and identity negotiation of rural migrants in the urban setting.^{9,10} Recognizing the widening rural-urban gap and the danger of rural unrest, as well as the decline of agriculture due to rural hollowing out, the Chinese party-state began a long journey of rural development under the rubric of “three rural questions” in the early 2000s aimed at turning back the outflow of rural resources and having “cities nurture the countryside” and “industry nurture agriculture”. Many of these rural policies are by now well-known, such as the abolishing of agricultural tax in 2004-2005, the initiative of “building a socialist countryside” via welfare extension and infrastructure construction, household registration system reforms, and focus on urbanizing smaller cities.

Beyond these institutional reforms, however, rural development policies also significantly encouraged and accelerated the entrance of urban industrial capital into agriculture, under the slogan of “agricultural modernization”. This is the area where agrarian studies scholars have made the most contribution, offering robust empirical evidence of the ways in which “agricultural modernization” is undertaken, including the cultivation of new actors such as

⁷ Jean C. Oi, “Fiscal Reform and the Economic Foundations of Local State Corporatism in China,” *World Politics* 45, no. 1 (1992): 99–126

⁸ Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁹ Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China’s Floating Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

dragon-head agrobusiness¹¹ and state-controlled rural cooperatives,¹² and the commodification of peasants' means of subsistence, especially land.¹³

Theoretically, China also presents an interesting variation on the traditional agrarian transition debate – that is, how rural agriculture fits into urban-centered capitalist development. Walker and Buck see in China's case a potential to expand the understanding of primitive accumulation, and show how development policies create a robust urban industrial capitalist class and absorb the rural into an expansive machine of expropriation.¹⁴ Huang et al, from the other end of the spectrum, argued that the agrarian transition in China can be characterized as “capitalization without proletarianization”, proposing the stability of the small-scale peasant economy as a distinguishing component of Chinese agrarian transition.¹⁵ Yan and Chen disagree with Huang et al, pointing out that China's path of agrarian transition occurs via both capitalization from above (through urban industrial capital's entrance) and from below (through peasants' gradual surplus accumulation and differentiation).¹⁶

Accompanying these political economic shifts are necessary discursive shifts of the countryside. Although rural China scholars are aware of the latter, the material and representational shifts of rural imaginary, which is an important facilitating and facilitated factor in urban-rural relations, have garnered little attention in political economy. A notable exception is Yan Hairong's 2003 work on the “spectralization” of rural China. She points out how the “spectralization” of the rural as the Other to an exclusively urban modernity, in conjunction with

¹¹ Mindi Schneider, “Dragon Head Enterprises and the State of Agribusiness in China,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 17, no. 1 (2017): 3-21.

¹² Hairong Yan and Yiyuan Chen, “Debating the Rural Cooperative Movement in China, the Past and the Present,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40, no. 6 (2013): 955–81.

¹³ You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Richard Walker and Daniel Buck, “The Chinese Road: Cities in the Transition to Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 46, no. 4 (July/August 2007): 39-66.

¹⁵ Philip C. C. Huang, Gao Yuan and Yusheng Peng, “Capitalization without Proletarianization in China's Agricultural Development,” *Modern China* 38, no. 2 (March 2012): 139–73.

¹⁶ Hairong Yan and Yiyuan Chen, “Agrarian Capitalization without Capitalism? Capitalist Dynamics from Above and Below in China,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15, no. 3 (July 2015): 366-391.

the political economic marginalization of the rural in the reform and opening period, undermined rurality as a point on which meaningful subjectivities can be anchored.¹⁷ In 2015, Zhang et al capture this as follows:

This discussion of the countryside as immersed in mounting crises also aided the emergence of a national discourse that framed all things rural as backward, unreformed and problematic. The entire rural society appeared in the popular imagination and the national ideology of developmentalism and urbanism as something ‘left behind’.¹⁸

More recently under Xi Jinping, however, the state has been actively attempting to salvage the image of the rural as part of its attempt to rejuvenate rural areas. Yan, Bun and Xu have called this “strategic essentialism” of the peasantry, which emphasizes protecting the peasantry as a “temporary unifying master-category”.¹⁹ However, this discursive change has generally been passed over in the emphasis on political economic policies, which is an unfortunate omission. This is because – borrowing the language popular in previous debates on the transition to “postmodernity” – different regimes of accumulation are made stable by different modes of regulation, and any analysis of the former is incomplete without the latter. A fuller comprehension of the agrarian transitions occurring in China now can only be achieved by incorporating the normative shifts in rural conceptualization that accompanies policy changes, and by scrutinizing how these two components work together.

To this end, the writings of literary scholars on rural China are quite seminal. Modern Chinese literature scholars have been acutely aware of the ambiguous figure of the rural in socialist and post-socialist literature, and this can be exceedingly useful for political economy scholars on contemporary China to place the material-discursive shifts of the rural into broader historical context. In examining interpretations of rural cooperatives in the novel of Zhao Shuli, He Guimei distinguishes three theoretical frameworks that I believe can also be applied to

¹⁷ Hairong Yan, “Spectralization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labor Mobility of Rural Young Women in Post-Mao China,” *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 4 (November 2003): 578-96.

¹⁸ Zhang, Oya and Ye, “Bringing Agriculture Back In”, 310.

¹⁹ Hairong Yan, Ku Hok Bun, and Siyuan Xu, “Rural revitalization, scholars, and the dynamics of the collective future in China,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 4 (2021): 853-74.

interpretations of rurality in general:²⁰ the socialist framework (1940-70s) that emphasizes rural cooperatives as necessary class struggle, the Enlightenment framework (1978-1990) that sees rural cooperatives as suffocating individual subjectivity, and the modernization framework (1990-2010s) that takes rural cooperatives as a necessary evil of primitive accumulation, which supports capitalist transition in China. However, He Guimei suggests that a new framework might be in the making with contemporary shifts in urban-rural relations – a heavily urbanized and industrialized China faced with mounting rural crises is now actively seeking to repair rural institutions and communities, which provides a ripe ground for imagining a new rural modernity grounded in the specific social and ethnical formations of rural China. Meng Yue also echoes this notion of new rural imagination in her analysis of the rural play *White Haired Girl*.²¹ She suggests that Enlightenment-inflected modern Chinese literature has been limited in its expression of rurality, which is construed as the complete Other of liberating urban modernity. This thus passes over any imagination of rural as a legitimate space of cultural expression. In what ways can rurality be reimagined in a China with a stable regime of urban capitalist accumulation is thus a question that modern Chinese literature scholars offer, and which the Chinese state has enthusiastically taken up in the past decade.

This brings me to the central argument of this thesis. I suggest that in contemporary China the rural is being commodified in two different but intricately related ways, and I call the products of these two commodification processes “rural commodity” and the “rural-as-commodity”. By rural commodity, I’m drawing on agrarian studies scholars who point to accelerated commodification of rural subsistence to suggest that the material forms of rural labor are being increasingly absorbed into the consumption and accumulation (i.e. capital’s reproduction) processes in urban areas. Going beyond this, I take inspiration from literary scholars to further suggest that agrarian transition is made possible, and in turn facilitates, a commodification of rurality itself, which I term the “rural-as-commodity”. This formulation indicates how the material rural commodity takes on a new ideological meaning to urban

²⁰ Guimei He, “Zhao Shuli’s Rural Utopia,” *Chinese Reading Newspaper*, April 29, 2015, 13.

²¹ Yue Meng, “The Significance of the Evolution of *White Haired Girl*: On the Multi-Historicity of Yan’an Arts and Literature,” in *Re-interpretation: Popular Arts and Literature and Ideology*, ed. Xiaobing Tang (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2007).

consumers, one that is tied to the sustainable biological and social reproduction of the urban middle class. The reconstruction of rurality from a category of backwardness to an object of desire and exchange, I argue, is a crucial way in which contemporary rural accumulation happens. This interplay between rural commodity and rural-as-commodity occurs both physically, in the form of urban consumers undertaking rural tourism, and representationally, in the form of media products that aestheticize the rural as a “healing” place that cures the crippled, unnatural human subjectivity associated with urban capitalism.

These two forms of commodification work together to transform the division of labor between urban and rural – rather than being the source of raw materials or the industrial reserve army for the urban, the rural has become a site of social reproduction for urbanites who may or may not have any rural ties. In other words, the rural is projected – by state policymakers, by urban consumers, by media producers, and by rural officials seeking local development – as a site where urban workers can temporarily escape expropriation and alienation *in order to* return to their urban workplace and continue producing surplus value. In this way, the reproductive rural is an emerging and important site at which urban-centered capitalist accumulation is sustained.

These two forms of commodification also transform the spatial relationship between re/production and consumption. Whereas material rural commodities may fit a conventional image of production-consumption under capitalism (i.e. produced in one place and consumed in another), when combined with the rural-as-commodity the production process and the consumption process become much more intertwined spatially. For instance, the rural commodity/rural-as-commodity is often produced and consumed in the same landscape. Furthermore, production can become itself an object of consumption and vice versa, and this simultaneous production-consumption process is made possible by a dialectic of space that makes the rural both abstract and concrete, homogenous and heterogenous. Chapter two will elaborate on the relationship between spatial landscapes of production and consumption, which I draw from Raymond Williams’ seminal *The Country and the City*. Chapter three will take up the dialectics of space that enable the production-consumption simultaneity in greater detail. Before delving into the chapters, however, some empirical context of China is necessary.

China's Context: Restructuring Development

Why has commodifying the rural become a national strategy in China? I argue that the social production of the two forms of rural commodity stems, at least in part, from China's national political economic restructuring efforts, and therefore the latter needs to be reviewed briefly before turning our attention to the specific strategies of rural commodification. Two issues of restructuring have been central to Chinese political economy since the late 1990s: pivoting from an investment-led growth model to a service consumption-led one, and pivoting from an overseas/export-oriented model to one relying on the domestic market.

Although these issues – increasing consumption and domestic reorientation – have a continuous presence in China's political discourse, there are four moments where they received more attention than usual: in 1998 after the Asian financial crisis, in 2008 after the global financial crisis, in 2014-15 in Xi's early years and facing uncertain global economic conditions, and from 2020 to present with the COVID-19 pandemic. Although these timings generally corresponded with major global economic concerns, the attention to domestic market and consumption should not be viewed as only a response to global crisis. Instead, global crisis often serves as a catalyst for restructuring that is already underway or is politically difficult to push in more stable years, particularly in the last two moments. To understand the role of rural-as-commodity in national political economy, it is necessary to take a closer look first at these moments of restructuring.

These two trends – increasing consumption and increasing the importance of the domestic market – are captured in the phrase “increase domestic demand” (扩大内需) that had been a staple in national policy making since 1998. After the 1997 financial crisis, the Chinese government implemented a series of loose monetary policies. The government work report of 1999 stated that these are strategies to “increase investment and increase domestic demand”, and most of the policies are targeted at increasing state investment for infrastructure construction²². This investment-heavy model of macroeconomic policy as part of “increasing domestic demand” is evident again in late 2008, when the Hu-Wen administration released “ten measures to increase

²² Linghua Meng, “1998 Increasing Domestic Demand: The Complex Symptoms that Cannot be Ignored,” *Financial and Economic Digest*, February 2, 2006, <https://finance.sina.cn/sa/2006-02-13/detail-ikkntiak9924050.d.html>

domestic demand and facilitate economic growth”, in which rural infrastructure construction and major transportation infrastructure projects were mobilized as tools for increasing aggregate demand. However, consumption became more important in the ten measures of 2008 compared to 1998 – creating social safety nets in rural areas and increasing individual consumption in both rural and urban areas were the ultimate aim of four of the ten measures.

A clear discursive shift towards public consumption and away from investment occurred in the report from the 18th National Congress in 2012: “we must hold on tightly to the strategic base of increasing domestic demand, accelerate the construction of mechanisms to increase long-term demand, release the consumption potential of citizens, maintain reasonable growth of investment, and increase the scale and scope of the domestic market”²³. Investment now ranks behind citizen demand in its strategic importance and has only the target of “reasonable growth”. This is not to say that investment became less important than consumption in reality; indeed, chapter 2 has shown that local governments still relied on investment even as they try to stimulate consumption. But there is a clear push towards increasing consumption to reduce reliance on investment as part of economic restructuring. This prioritization of consumption is evident in the wording of 12th five-year-plan as well, in which “consumption, investment and export” are proposed as the means for economic growth.

Reflecting this trend of restructuring, a welter of national policies targeted at increasing domestic service consumption were released in 2014-2015, including “Opinions to facilitate domestic trade’s healthy development”, “Opinions to accelerate the sports industry and sport-related consumption”, and “Opinions to facilitate the reform and development of the tourism industry”. In 2015, the State Council followed up with “Opinions to further facilitate tourism investment and consumption”, and two indicative documents - “Guiding Opinions to increase lifestyle services and upgrade the consumption structure” and “Guiding Opinions to ensure the leading potential of new consumption to develop new drivers for new supply”. The meaning of increasing domestic demand also shifted clearly in politburo meetings from using investment to

²³ Hu Jintao, “Report at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party,” November 17, 2012, accessed May 7, 2023, http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2012-11/17/content_2268826_3.htm

stimulated aggregate demand to increasing individual demand linked to lifestyle improvement, and this shift is articulated as a core component of restructuring national political economy²⁴.

In 2020, domestic market took priority over global trade in national discourse. Xi Jinping offered a vision of “new development scheme” (新发展格局) in early 2020, described as a scheme where “big domestic circulation is dominant, and domestic and international double circulation facilitating each other”. This vision was then echoed by the 14th Five Year Plan. The key strategy to achieving this “double circulation”, according to the State Council, is increasing “new demand”, which is a flexible (or slippery) term referring to any kind of service consumption facilitated by digital technology, from online grocery retail to the integration of cultural production, tourism, and entertainment²⁵. In late 2022, the State Council further released “Strategic Guidelines for increasing domestic demand” (扩大内需战略规划纲要)²⁶, testifying to the strategic importance of individual consumption.

Increasing individual consumption, however, needs individuals to have enough surplus to spend. In 1998 and 2008, favorable tax policies and the loosening of monetary policy were offered to stimulate consumption. Simultaneously, and recognizing that these policies would probably only affect urban residents who have stable disposable income and spending habits in the first place, both rounds of increasing demand also tried to building up rural infrastructure and social safety net – this not only served as a short-term stimulus of aggregate demand through investment, but also aimed for a long-term improvement of rural livelihoods so that rural residents could consume more. In 2014-15 and 2020-22, the rural was featured more explicitly but also more ambiguously, both as an object and as a subject for consumption – that is, villages and small towns are called upon to seek growth through both increasing service income (through tourism, through selling local products via new digital logistical networks etc.) and, relatedly,

²⁴ Fu Cong, “Li Keqiang: Eliminate Institutional Obstacles to Increasing Consumption,” October 14, 2016, accessed May 7, 2023, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-10/14/content_5119285.htm

²⁵ State Council, “Opinions on Using New Business Models to Lead and Accelerate New Consumption,” October 22, 2020, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-10/22/content_5553179.htm

²⁶ State Council, “Guidelines on the Strategic Plan of Increasing Domestic Consumption”, December 14, 2022, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-12/14/content_5732067.htm

become fiscally self-sufficient and increase residents' income so they can also contribute to national consumption. The meaning of the rural is remade in this process: rather than a passive target of state investment aid, the rural is projected to be an independent and self-reliant participant in state-capitalist development both as a commodity and as a consumer. This is the rural imagination that underlies the social production of the rural-as-commodity – on the one hand, the rural needs to be desirable enough, i.e. it must cultivate a use-value, in order to circulate in the national market; on the other hand, the rural cannot just be a passive commodity, but must also actively absorb the surplus value generated from its own circulation, fix this value in place, and remake itself as a productive consumer. How is this new rurality created? Who are the actors and what are their motivations? These questions will be explored in the rest of the thesis.

Methodology and Limitations

Chapter two, which explore the transformation of two mostly rural counties into tourist landscapes of simultaneous production and consumption, relies mostly on digital archives and media sources. While fieldwork would have been an ideal complement, the COVID pandemic has made traveling to China during the thesis writing process unfeasible. Therefore, in this chapter I use government work reports, official newspapers of provinces and cities, as well as different news outlets. Those familiar with China-related research will know that these sources are generally biased towards positive accounts – government successes will be celebrated, sometimes even exaggerated, while failed projects will receive little attention. Recognizing this limitation, I do not argue in chapter two that this tourism-oriented transformation is necessarily very successful in restructuring the counties' development trajectory. Instead, I argue simply that there are increasing efforts, in the form of political attention, media spotlight, and capital/investment flow, towards this restructuring goal. This in itself is illustrative of a change in the material environment of and ideology surrounding the countryside. Chapter three focuses on how a new aesthetic and representational rurality is created in the Chinese mediascape, and its primary method is cinematic analysis. The granularity of cinematic analysis necessarily means that I am unable to survey a large swarth of literature – instead, I will focus on one particular show. While this makes overarching generalizations unfeasible, this focus allows me to scrutinize in detail the strategies involved in constructing a new rurality, and thus takes a more

in-depth look at what this rurality is. Directions for future research may therefore include ethnographic fieldwork and interviews to complement chapter two, and literary and cinematic analysis on a larger scale in chapter three.

CHAPTER II:
RURAL TOURISM AND EXPANDED REPRODUCTION OF CAPITAL IN THE
COUNTRYSIDE:
GAOXIAN AND CHONGYI AS CASE STUDIES

Introduction

In observing the emergence of an aesthetic “Nature” in 18th century England, Raymond Williams suggests that “a working country is hardly ever a landscape”.²⁷ The self-conscious spectator of nature that came into being in the consolidation of rural land ownership during this period found it increasingly necessary to institute, as Williams describes, a “separation of production and consumption” on the rural landscape. The 18th century English landlord succeeded in organizing parts of his land for production, on which laborers worked, and parts of his land for consumption, where he (and his bourgeois guests) can appreciate a nature that is supposedly untouched by labor, a “prospect”.²⁸ However, as a Marxist, Williams is quick to point out that the landscape of production and the landscape of consumption are related parts of the same process – the transformation of class in the countryside and of the relationship between human and nature, urban and rural.

In this chapter, I take inspiration from Williams’ landscape of production and consumption to examine rural transformation in contemporary China, focusing on the 2010s. I show that instead of imagining a separation between the productive and consumptive parts, actors engaging in rural transformations imagine an organic interface between production and consumption as the key to making the rural landscape an appropriate site for the expanded reproduction of capital. On the one hand, it is only *when* the countryside is a productive landscape that it can also function as a consumptive landscape, and a consumptive landscape is insufficient when it does not also double as a productive one. On the other hand, a productive

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 120.

²⁸ Williams, 124.

landscape that has no consumptive functions is a crippled site of capital accumulation, and cannot be an integral part of the state-capitalist agenda of development.

The framework of landscape of production/consumption is related to the two forms of the rural commodity elaborated in chapter one. A productive rural landscape produces material rural commodities, most commonly agricultural output. A consumptive landscape produces the rural-as-commodity, which the (often urban) spectator consumes by viewing and experiencing, whether in person (via rural tourism) or on screen (via media production about the rural). What a landscape of both production and consumption produces, therefore, are both commodities simultaneously. This chapter focuses on how intertwining the two forms of rural commodity occurs on the ground – that is, how the material landscape of production and consumption is built. The next chapter will focus on how this occurs on screen, or in media production.

More specifically, this chapter will examine how agriculture, a productive function of the countryside, becomes intertwined with rural tourism, a consumptive function. I examine two case studies, Gaoxian county in Sichuan and Chongyi county in Jiangxi. I show how Gaoxian county turned its agricultural landscape into one that doubles as a tourism landscape, while Chongyi county turned its tourism landscape into one that also relies upon agriculture – one developed consumption out of production, the other production out of consumption. I demonstrate how this intertwining of production and consumption is a core strategy of rural development that the counties explicitly adopted. This chapter thus offers new insights to the logic of rural transformation in China, and more generally to the relationships between urban and rural, production and consumption, agriculture and capitalism.

In terms of method, this chapter draws mostly on government report and print publication archives. Most sources used for the Gaoxian section will come from Gaoxian county government's digital archives, supplemented by sources from *Yibin Daily* (the major newspaper of Yibin city, under whose jurisdiction Gaoxian lies). Sources used in the Chongyi section come mostly from four publications: *Jiangxi Daily* (the major newspaper of Jiangxi province), *Southern Jiangxi Daily* (the major newspaper of Ganzhou city, under whose jurisdiction Chongyi county lies), *Old Regional Development* (the journal by Jiangxi province's Poverty Alleviation Bureau), and Chongyi government's work reports. The limitations of these sources, as discussed in chapter one, should be kept in mind here.

Gaoxian and Dayan Mountain: Tea Farms and Tea-tourism

Gaoxian is one of seven counties under the jurisdiction of Yibin city, a large city in southern Sichuan, and is slightly south of Yibin city proper. There are as of 2021 thirteen towns under Gaoxian, which host a total of 195 villages. Gaoxian lies on the southwest rim of the Sichuan basin, with the Tibetan plateau to the west and the Yun-gui plateau to the south. On a more immediate scale, the county is adjacent to the Daliang mountains to the east and the Wumeng mountains to the south. The county itself is also quite mountainous – of the 1320 square kilometers of administrative land area, 43.88% is mountain and 43.72% is hills. The county has abundant water resources, particularly rivers, as it lies at the origin of the Yangtze River proper. Gaoxian’s climate is fairly warm and wet, with an annual average temperature of 18.1 Celsius, average precipitation of 1021 mm, no snow and minimal frost days²⁹. This makes the county very suitable for a range of agricultural products, including tea, rice, corn, and sweet potatoes.

Indeed, agriculture is the county’s dominant sector in terms of employment. Staple foods (rice, corn, and sweet potatoes), tea, animal husbandry (particularly pigs, chickens, and ducks), sericulture, and bamboo make up most of Gaoxian’s agriculture sector in the 2000s. Its industrial sector is also mostly associated with food processing, such as alcohol brewing and tea processing³⁰. In the 2010s, when Yibin began shifting to a development strategy based on renewable energy and high-end manufacturing, Gaoxian could not participate extensively in the strategy as its mountainous and fertile landscape was unsuitable for building industrial parks. Instead, it focused on upgrading its agriculture. This did not just mean increasing output, but also involved an extension of agriculture into tourism, making its rural landscape of agricultural production double as a landscape of consumption for urban visitors. This section will discuss how this strategy is materialized by closely examining the transformation of Gaoxian’s tea sector, particularly through tracing the evolution of a tea production base called Dayan Mountain (大雁岭), located in Dawo town in the center-north of the county. Dayan Mountain, originally a

²⁹ “Overview of Gaoxian,” Gaoxian Government, accessed May 7, 2023, [高县概况 \(gaoxian.gov.cn\)](http://gaoxian.gov.cn)

³⁰ Shilong Zhao, Yan Chen, and Zhiyan Luo, “The Emergence of Upgraded Gaoxian,” *Yibin Daily*, July 26, 2013, A01.

mountain with scattered tea plots in the late 2000s, was transformed in 2010s into a large, standardized, corporate-run tea cultivation base as well as a scenic resort and a national AAAA-level tourism site. A closer look at how this happened will reveal a development logic that interweaves production and consumption, indicative of the transformation of agriculture and urban-rural relations in 2010s China.

Wumeng Mountain Regional Poverty Alleviation and Development

There are many ways to begin the narrative of the Dayan mountain scenic resort – as many ways to begin as there are actors involved in its development. A convenient narrative starting point is 2011. In May of 2011, the State Council released Guidelines for China’s Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development 2011-2020 (中国农村扶贫开发纲要), a document that would anchor rural development for the next decade³¹. The Guidelines defined the target subjects of poverty alleviation efforts, which included a category called “connected regions of severe poverty” (连片特困地区). This category included eleven mountainous regions designated for targeted material and social improvement. Among these is the Wumeng (乌蒙) mountain region that traverses Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces. The poverty rate in the designated Wumeng region has been reported as 47%. In March 2012, a State Council poverty alleviation work group meeting and the subsequently approved “Guidelines for Wumeng mountain region poverty alleviation and development 2011-2020” (乌蒙山片区扶贫开发规划 2011-2020) listed out the cities and counties that the Wumeng mountain region poverty alleviation should target³². However, sub-national governments also had some discretion in selecting which cities and counties to focus on as part of the Wumeng region poverty alleviation effort. In March 2012, Sichuan province’s own “Guidelines for Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development” – anchored on the national level Guidelines – designated four connected regions that fall partly or wholly under the province’s jurisdiction, including the Wumeng region, and further gave

³¹ State Council, *Guidelines for China’s Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development 2011-2020*, December 1, 2011, https://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2011-12/01/content_2008462.htm

³² State Council Poverty Alleviation Working Group and NDRC, *Guidelines for Wumeng mountain region poverty alleviation and development 2011-2020*, March 9, 2012, http://cn.chinagate.cn/infocus/2013-09/25/content_30126994.htm

discretion to city and county level governments to determine which localities and aspects to focus on for poverty alleviation. Sichuan Guidelines also suggested that for high poverty areas not within the designated regions, sub-provincial governments can consider bundling them together for poverty alleviation and development (连篇扶贫开发)³³. This discretion carved out by provincial and sub-provincial governments may explain why Gaoxian, which was not included in the February 2012 central-level Wumeng region guidelines, was nevertheless included as a core focus county of Wumeng region poverty alleviation and received many resources from Sichuan province and Yibin city governments³⁴.

The picture painted by central and provincial guidelines presents a fairly clear (although not without contradiction) line of policy development. However, the relationship between policy documents and actual practice in China is usually nonlinear. The connected region development program in Gaoxian was, in fact, well underway in 2011 and concluded in 2013, drawing capital from a variety of sources and mobilizing agriculture companies that had been targeted for dragon-head enterprise incubation since the late 2000s. The Wumeng regional development initiative of 2011-2013 paved the way for accelerated capital accumulation, especially in the tea sector, later on. It is to this period that I now turn.

The Beginning of Dayan Mountain Farm (2011-2013)

Prior to 2011, Gaoxian had made modernizing agriculture and developing industry through agricultural processing a main priority. One of the key ways for doing so is incubating dragon-head enterprises. In the late 2000s, Gaoxian built an agricultural processing industrial park along its two administrative centers, Wenjiang town and Qinfu town. Enterprises selected for government investment and support are encouraged to relocate to the Wenjiang-Qingfu industrial park to stimulate industrial aggregation/clustering effects, and in 2011 alone Gaoxian county government had bundled together 102 million RMB from central, provincial, and city

³³ Sichuan Government, *Sichuan Province Guidelines for Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development*, March 26, 2012, <https://www.sc.gov.cn/10462/10464/10797/2012/3/26/10204307.shtml>

³⁴“Gaoxian Invests 92.78 Million over 3 Years for 290,000 Hectares of Poverty Alleviation Tea Farms,” Gaoxian News Web, September 10, 2013, <http://gaoxian.ybxww.com/content/2013-9/10/2013910100051316E-02.htm>

development project contracts to invest in incubating dragon-heads³⁵. One of the dragon-head enterprises that had entered the industrial park by 2011 is the tea company Zaobaijian, which would become the main corporate actor behind the Dayan Mountain resort.

Zaobaijian was born through the restructuring of the state-owned Sichuan Gaoxian Tea Group in 2002³⁶. The company was listed as a target for dragon-head enterprise development in Gaoxian's 11th Five Year Plan, and was projected to be one of three pillars for Gaoxian's tea sector, along with two other tea companies, Chuanhong and Fengding³⁷. In 2011, when Gaoxian embarked on connected regional development under the (as yet unofficial but soon to be expected) auspice of Wumeng mountain region poverty alleviation and development project, the Poverty Alleviation bureau chose tea production as the major development strategy and enlisted the three dragon-head tea companies as main actors. The county government identified three regions for tea development: from Luorun to Kejiu town, from Dawo to Shuanghe town, and from Laifu to Yinxi town, slated for targeted investment in 2011, 2012, and 2013 respectively, and implemented a "dragon-head + production base" strategy in addition to requiring each enterprise to relocate to one of the three regions³⁸. Therefore, the townships and villages in these three regions began actively building tea farms through redistributing land and constructing water and road infrastructures to facilitate the farms, and signed procurement agreements with the three dragon-head enterprises. This was how Zaobaijian came to the Dayan mountain under Dawu village, in Dawo town. Before elaborating on Zaobaijian's activities in Dawu, a description of these three years of tea sector expansion is necessary, as it during this time that the foundation for a tea-based accumulation in the countryside.

In 2011, the Luorun-Kejiu region's tea development project had a total investment of 31.414 million RMB, covering 10 villages under the two townships, and built a total of 10,000

³⁵“Gaoxian Strengthens Agricultural Dragon-Head Business,” Gaoxian Government, accessed May 7, 2023, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/bmdt/201106/t20110623_877376.html

³⁶ “Introduction,” Zaobaijian Company, accessed May 7, 2023, <https://www.sczbj.com/profile.html>

³⁷ “Zaobaijian builds China's Primary Black Tea Estate,” *Yibin News*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.ybxww.com/caijing/html/201506/130363.shtml>

³⁸ “Gaoxian Rides on Wumeng Regional Poverty Alleviation to Develop Tea Industry,” *China Gate*, November 6, 2013, http://cn.chinagate.cn/povertyrelief/2013-11/06/content_30510248.htm

hectares of new tea farm and associated infrastructure. In 2012, the Dawo-Shuanghe region's 4 villages saw an investment of 31.116 million RMB and 11,000 hectares of new tea farm and associated infrastructure. In 2013, Laifu-Yinxi region mobilized 20,442 million to build 8000 hectares of tea farm and associated infrastructure³⁹. The money for 2012 came from three sources: provincial level project subsidy (10 million), county government fiscal fund (1.78 million), and the rest was investment by villagers⁴⁰. The source distribution for 2013 was very similar (the provincial level subsidy was still 10 million, with the rest covered by county and villager investment)⁴¹. Although the exact statistics for 2011 is unclear, it is reasonable to suspect the distribution was similar to 2012 and 2013.

The township and villages within and around the region actively sought out contracts with dragon-head enterprises during these three years as well. The county government's "dragon-head enterprise + production base" model meant it both invested in transforming the village landscape into tea farms and pushed for dragon-head enterprises to prioritize cultivating these new tea farms into sources of raw material and labor. The tea plants that were to be planted in these new tea farms, for instance, are purchased in bulk from dragon-head enterprises. The county also allocated each of the three regions to the three dragon-heads, requesting the latter to move their bases into the region that they were paired with. In 2012, therefore, Zaobaijian tea company moved their headquarters to Dawu village under Dawo town, within the Dawo-Shuanghe region. However, townships and villages did not limit themselves to their designated enterprise. Kejiu town, for example, signed production reserve contracts (后备基地协议) with both Chuanhong and Zaobaijian companies in 2011, and planted tea strains from both companies in the 5000 new hectares of tea farm they developed⁴². Fuxing town similarly did not limit itself to the designated dragon-head of Fengding, and contracted with Zaobaijian as well in summer

³⁹ Gaoxian News Web, "Gaoxian Invests."

⁴⁰ "The County Finishes 2012 Annual Tea Regional Development Project," Gaoxian Government, March 20, 2013, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/bmdt/201303/t20130320_881109.html

⁴¹ "The County Begins 2013 Annual Regional Poverty Alleviation Development," Gaoxian Government, June 18, 2013, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/bmdt/201306/t20130618_881630.html

⁴² "Kejiu Town Spring Tea Value Breaks Through 2 Million," Gaoxian Government, April 16, 2013, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/xzcz/201204/t20120416_877980.html

2011 to expand its tea farm scale⁴³. Townships and villages neighboring the three regions also took initiative to renovate or build tea farms in order to attract collaboration with dragon-head enterprises. The overall effect, therefore, was a county-wide frenzy of tea farm expansion and renovation. By the end of 2013, there were 29,000 hectares of new tea farms, and the county further set the goal of having 300,000 hectares total of tea farms by 2015⁴⁴.

Simultaneous with tea farm expansion was the centralization and consolidation of the tea sector in the county. As the county government hope to rely on dragon-head enterprises' supply chain leadership power, it encouraged mergers and restructuring of smaller tea companies to cultivate the three dragon-heads. Showered with state resources, the three chosen tea companies expanded rapidly. Dragon-head tea companies also became closely wrapped in social work and responsibility like poverty alleviation – for instance, offering low-cost tea plants and training workshops for tea farmers and prioritizing procurement from the farms built under poverty alleviation campaign.

Dayan Mountain Takes Off: From Tea Production to Tourism (2013-2016)

After relocating to Dawu village in 2012, Zaobaijian selected Dayan mountain within the village and began constructing a 5000 hectare ecological tea farm (生态茶园) in collaboration with the village⁴⁵. In 2013, Zaobaijian's commanding base has taken its initial shape. Zhang Dexun, the CEO of the company, described it as "one park and three bases". "One park" refers to the science and technology demonstration park slated for construction in Wenjiang-Qinfu industrial park. The "three bases" were results of consolidating the new and renovated tea farms that the company acquired/contracted with. The Dayan Mountain base in Dawo town's Dawu village was the core focus project of the company, with a 50 million investment by the company and an additional investment for building a tea processing factory. The "916" base deeper in the Wumeng mountain region under the jurisdiction of Dawo's neighboring Luochang town is where

⁴³ "Fuxing Town Accelerate Rural Industrial Restructuring," Gaoxian Government, November 27, 2011, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/xzcz/201111/t20111128_877468.html

⁴⁴ Gaoxian News Web, "Gaoxian Invests."

⁴⁵ "Dayan Mountain Scenic Area Strives for AA-level," Gaoxian News Web, December 18, 2015, <http://ja.ybxww.com/content/2015-12/18/20151218143829734E-02.htm>

most of the company's original R&D and main processing factory lies. The Qixianhu base was contracted with Fuxing town and began construction in 2011, and in 2013 the infrastructure for the new tea farm base was still being built⁴⁶.

Several trends are continuing and emerging within this period. The county's consolidation of the tea sector and support for dragon-head enterprises accelerated, with clear directions released in late 2013 to "integrate small and medium brands across the region and collectively build the Zaobaijian and Chuanhong brands". The county government also managed to squeeze out more money for constructing and renovating tea farms by incorporating some of the most productive farms into the county's guiding plans agricultural modernization, and hence allocating targeted funds (专项资金) to them⁴⁷. Expansion of tea cultivation also continued with full momentum. The county set the goals of expanding Zaobaijian's production and processing scale in 2014 to "build the main tea base of southern Sichuan", and aimed for having 250,000 hectares of total tea farms at the end of the year⁴⁸. Township and village cadres' evaluation mechanism was also adjusted to prioritize the development of tea cultivation in their jurisdiction⁴⁹.

The reworking of the social and material landscape associated with these developments can be seen clearly in Fuxing town, where Zaobaijian's Qixianhu base was located. The construction of the base had displaced villagers, and the township invested 2 million in 2014 for a "displacement aid" program (移民后扶项目) to channel the surplus labor into tea farming and processing. Zaobaijian's Qixianhu base, which had in 2014 began its function of cultivating tea sprouts, benefitted from the ready labor pool, and the township's tea sector growth benefitted from the ready capital, technology, and skill training that the company provided. The township

⁴⁶ "Zaobaijian Reaches for 500 Million with one Park and Three Bases," Gaoxian News Web, October 31, 2013, <http://ja.ybxww.com/content/2013-10/31/201310311604556600458.htm>

⁴⁷"Gaoxian Accelerates Tea Development," Gaoxian Government, September 25, 2013, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/gxyw/201309/t20130925_877560.html

⁴⁸"7th Yibin and Zaobaijian Early Tea Ceremony Takes Place in Zaobaijian Wumeng Tea Base," Gaoxian Government, February 20, 2014, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/gxyw/201402/t20140220_878156.html

⁴⁹ "Fuxing Town Pushes for Tea Development," Gaoxian Government, September 5, 2014, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/xzcz/201409/t20140905_879608.html

and village cadres in Fuxing had their evaluation mechanism tied to a goal of adding 5000 hectares to the town's tea farms in 2014, almost a 143% increase from the 3500 hectares the town had in early 2014, and a 10,000 hectare total target in 2015⁵⁰. Dawo town also had a similar displacement aid program that the county's Poverty Alleviation and Migration Bureau and Zaobaijian company collaborated on, although the exact statistics of the program are unclear⁵¹.

As Gaoxian was being reworked by state-corporate collaboration into a landscape of tea production, another process became legible in 2014 and quickly gathered discursive momentum in 2015 – that of turning the landscape of production into one of consumption, and one specifically catering to Yibin city proper. In October 2013, Zaobaijian's CEO Zhang Dexun had already described to reporter on the corporate vision for its Dayan base. Calling it the “Dayan Mountain ecological tea farm tourism and sightseeing base” (大雁岭生态茶园旅游观光基地), Zhang described it as a base where developing new strains of tea plants, demonstrating planting and processing tea, “cultural experience” and “feature tourism” (特色旅游) all converge⁵². The phrasing of “demonstrating the planting and processing of tea” is illustrative – the base is imagined as a place of production, and the act of production itself also makes the base a place of tourism and sightseeing. Both the final processed tea and the place of processing itself are commodities to be exchanged and leverage for capital inflow to the village and the company.

This explicit designation of productive consumption is not a unique vision of Zaobaijian, but is part of the county-wide uptake of a discourse of tourism development in conjunction with tea cultivation. At the start of 2014, the county's yearly project plans mentioned that another dragon-head company, Chuanhong, was already developing an “ecological sightseeing and tourism base” on the tea farms that it contracted, and the county was ready to channel resources towards it⁵³. In March 2014, when the head of Yibin city's Poverty Alleviation and Migration

⁵⁰ Gaoxian Government, “Fuxing Town.”

⁵¹ “County Vice Secretary and Magistrate Investigates Regional Poverty Alleviation in Dawo Town,” Gaoxian Government, September 29, 2013, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/gxyw/201309/t20130929_877786.html

⁵² Gaoxian News Web, “Zaobaijian Reaches.”

⁵³ “Four Excels Make Certain a Good Start”, Gaoxian Government, February 18, 2014, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/bmdt/201402/t20140218_882397.html

Bureau (扶贫移民局) came to Dawu town to inspect the Dawu village tea farms and villagers' relocation project, leaders from both the county's poverty alleviation bureau and Zaobaijian received him and assured him of the village's progress towards "constructing Yibin's back garden" (建设宜宾后花园)⁵⁴.

The discourse of tourism (connected to Yibin city) became more pervasive in 2015. In February, the county magistrate and the head of the county Tourism Bureau came to Dawu village to visit the Zaobaijian Dayan mountain base, and offered some ideas on Dawu's tourism development, including further integrating tea industry development and tourism planning⁵⁵. Two months later, Yibin city's party secretary also came to Dawu village and emphasized cultivating the connection between local ecological resources, tourism, and poverty alleviation. He also announced that Dawu should focus on its geographical proximity to the Yibin urban market to develop its tea production as well as its "rural leisure tourism" (乡村休闲旅游) industry to increase villagers' income⁵⁶. In November, the second-in-command of the Yibin Investment Bureau came to Gaoxian and mentioned "ecological tourism and sightseeing agriculture" (生态旅游观光农业) as one direction for the county's investment lobbying (招商引资)⁵⁷.

The emphasis on tourism was not just gesturing, but was also descriptive of the real material changes in the rural landscape. It is in 2015 that the Dayan Mountain base's transformation into a scenic resort became distinctly legible. In June 2015, Zaobaijian's Zhang Dexun announced new plans for Dayan: with another 210 million RMB investment, Zaobaijian will construct "China's Primary Black Tea Estate" (中国红茶第一庄园) out of its Dayan base.

⁵⁴ "City Poverty Alleviation and Migration Bureau Inspects Dawu Town," Gaoxian Government, March 20, 2014, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/xzcz/201403/t20140320_879369.html

⁵⁵ "County Vice Secretary and Magistrate Visits Dawu Village in Dawu Town," Gaoxian Government, March 30, 2015, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/gxyw/201503/t20150305_879291.html

⁵⁶ "City Party Secretary Inspects Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development in Dawu Village, Dawu Town", Gaoxian Government, April 15, 2015, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/gxyw/201504/t20150415_879385.html

⁵⁷ "Yibin Investment Bureau Inspects Gaoxian," Gaoxian Government, November 25, 2015, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zjgx/tzgx/tzdt/201511/t20151125_892329.html

This estate will, according to Zhang, be the company's attempt to integrate three sectors (agriculture, industry, service), and realize both corporate development and poverty alleviation simultaneously. The estate will use its tea base to develop "sightseeing, tourism, leisure, vacation" services, and will be composed of a series of smaller projects like ecological scenic tea park, tea variety park, tea processing, tea inspection, tea culture experience, tourist reception, wetland park, a leisure farm (休闲农庄), flower sea, and other sightseeing spots. Zhang proudly announces that the Estate will help Zaobaijian extend its production chain and cultivate new areas of growth, while also creating jobs for rural labor and mobilize surrounding peasant families to plant tea, flowers, fruits, livestock, and enter the service industry, thus realizing the integration of all three sectors and transform the rural both "environmentally and spiritually"⁵⁸. It was also by the end of 2015 that the 5000 hectares of ecological tea farms that began construction in 2012 had been completed – 1000 hectares were renovated from pre-existing tea farms, and another 4000 was new⁵⁹.

While Zaobaijian took the lead in constructing this Estate, the Dawo township and the county government altered the Estate's surrounding landscape to facilitate the Dayan Mountain's transformation into a tourist/scenic region (景区). The county laid the tourism infrastructure for Dawu village in 2015, including signs for tourists, three 6000 m² parking lots and signages, six tourist resting spots, two "ecological public toilets", 70 trashcans and 5 cleaners, and extended postal, public telephone, and UnionPay POS services to the village⁶⁰. With Zaobaijian leading the construction of tea-related sightseeing spots, the county government, enlisting and collaborating with other tourism companies, built a series of sightseeing spots around Zaobaijian's tea farm. By the end of 2015, the Dayan base area had three main sights: a Dayan Mountain tea culture park (led by Zaobaijian), an (artificial) Dayan lake, and a "hundred-flower" garden (constructed by two local tourism companies with government collaboration, Yunfeng Lake Tourism Development Inc. and Linfeng Tourism Inc.). Several more sights, including more tea parks, a wild fruit region, and a water park, were under construction. In December 2015,

⁵⁸ *Yibin News*, "Zaobaijian Builds."

⁵⁹ Gaoxian News Web, "Dayan Mountain Strives."

⁶⁰ Gaoxian News Web, "Dayan Mountain Strives."

Gaoxian's Publicity Department (宣传部) hosted the assessment conference for Dayan Mountain's designation as a national AA-level tourist site. Yibin city's Tourism Bureau sent an assessment team to review the three main sights at Dayan (and those under construction) as well as the tourism infrastructure. The team then approved Dayan Mountain's application to be an AA-level resort, and what began as a base of purely tea production became an officially-recognized tourism site. At the end of the assessment conference, head of the Gaoxian Publicity Department expressed to the Yibin Tourism Bureau's team that Gaoxian will strive to make Dayan Mountain into "the first choice of Yibin citizen's ecological and leisurely vacation" and an "integral part of Yibin and Sichuan province's tourism layout"⁶¹. Popular media reporting on the Dayan Mountain's designation as an AA resort also noted that visitors of the base at the end of 2015 were mostly Yibin urbanites⁶². The orientation towards Yibin city is therefore clear. In 2016, Dayan Mountain tea production continued to intensify, and its tourism infrastructure continued to attract county and corporate investments. With the Dayan Mountain base and its surrounding sights, Gaoxian itself also successfully applied to become a provincial-level tourism poverty alleviation demonstration district⁶³.

2013 to 2016 saw Dayan Mountain taking shape as a landscape of both production and consumption. From 2017 onwards, the base's two components – tea cultivation and tourism – became integral to each other, and served to interpolate Gaoxian into city, provincial, and national-level strategies of development.

Modern Agriculture and Rural Revitalization: The Coming of Age of Dayan Mountain (2017 – 2020)

A significant event in October 2017 is the 19th NCCPC (十九大), which inaugurated the "rural revitalization" (乡村振兴) initiative. In many ways, rural revitalization continued themes

⁶¹ "Dayan Mountain Scenic Site Reviewed for AA-Level Designation," Gaoxian Government, December 24, 2015, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zjgx/lygx/lydt/201512/t20151224_891607.html

⁶² Gaoxian News Web, "Dayan Mountain Strives."

⁶³ "City Party Committee Inspects Gaoxian," Gaoxian Government, May 27, 2017, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/gxyw/201705/t20170527_881948.html

from previous initiatives such as the “three rural questions” and “building a socialist new countryside” under Hu-Wen administration and the targeted poverty alleviation initiative in Xi’s early years as chairman. A few trends, however, represent newer twists. In discussion of constructing a “modern agricultural sector”, Xi encourages the integrated development between first, second, and third sectors in rural areas (促进农村一二三产业融合发展), the exploration of different methods to increase income, and support for associated entrepreneurship among farmers⁶⁴.

The rhetoric of “integrating the three sectors” (三产融合), or the integration of agriculture, industry, and service, enters into the dominant national discourse of rural development after the 19th NCCPC. However, the term has been explored and experimented with in discussions of modernizing agriculture before October 2017. Sichuan province, which had been experimenting with different kinds of modern agricultural sector integration exemplar parks (现代农业产业融合示范园), released in August 2017 an “Opinions on Accelerating Modern Agriculture Sector Integration Exemplar Parks”. The opinions made clear connections between modernizing agriculture and cultural and tourist productions and asked for “deeply integration of agriculture with tourism, culture, science and technology, and health”. To achieve this, the opinions imagined nothing short of a complete transformation of the agricultural landscape: “construct the park’s industrial base *as scenic sites*, create leisure agricultural sites...and specialty villages...create *countryside complexes* (田园综合体) that integrate sustainable agriculture, culturally innovative agriculture, and experiential agriculture” (emphasis added)⁶⁵. As the previous sub-section made clear, there had been many sub-provincial experiments of agro-tourism integration in this vein prior to the opinions, but the opinions consolidated these efforts into a distinct strategy that provided both legitimacy and organized (discursive and material) support to local experiments.

⁶⁴ Xi Jinping, “Report at the 19th NCCPC”, *Communist Members Web*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.12371.cn/2017/10/27/ART11509103656574313.shtml>

⁶⁵ Sichuan Government, *Opinions on Accelerating Modern Agriculture Sector Integration Exemplar Parks*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.sc.gov.cn/10462/c103046/2017/8/17/9dfa8f25b5d04ddd9309f473f3e11266.shtml>

Dayan Mountain, which by 2017 had already become an agro-tourist resort, rode on this push towards three sector integration to expand in scale and into other service-type or consumptive industries and activities. After the 19th NCCPC, Gaoxian county gave the Dayan Mountain project a new title of “rural revitalization strategic project” (乡村振兴示范区), and shifted from focusing on infrastructural transformations to emphasize industrial upgrading, ecological development, and cultural changes⁶⁶. What this meant in practice is more emphasis on the tourism part of the Dayan mountain resort. In December 2017, the county magistrate-led work meeting in Dawu village emphasized the construction of Dayan Mountain into an AAAA-level national tourism site as a key component of the rural revitalization strategic project, stressing the combination of “modern agriculture, rural tourism, and party building”⁶⁷. In January 2018, the Yibin vice mayor visited Dayan Mountain and commented on how rural revitalization initiative provide new opportunities for the resort – he emphasized the coordinated development of the resort with its industrial park function and its ability to mobilize rural tourism entrepreneurship in surrounding areas. He further encouraged better branding of the resort to attract tourists from “Yibin and surrounding areas”⁶⁸.

Perhaps most telling of the increased emphasis on the consumptive aspect of Dayan Mountain can be found in a report published in *Yibin News* by Dawo town’s party secretary Tu Dong in June 2018. Explicitly adopting the “three sector integration” rhetoric, he announced that Dawo town will continue to push for agro-tourism development that “services Yibin, integrates with Yibin, and absorbs Yibin” (referring to Yibin city proper). This involves a logic of “turning farms into parks, villages into scenic sites, products into gifts, farm houses into guest houses, and villagers into investors”⁶⁹. The coupling of production and consumption thus is the town’s core development strategy.

⁶⁶ “Huang Xiuguo Inspects Dayan Mountain Rural Revitalization Strategic Project,” Gaoxian Government, December 28, 2017, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/gxyw/201712/t20171228_883229.html

⁶⁷ Gaoxian Government, “Huang Xiuguo.”

⁶⁸ “City Leaders Inspects Rural Revitalization Project in Dawo Town,” Gaoxian Government, January 31, 2018, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/xzcz/201801/t20180131_890848.html

⁶⁹ Tu Dong, “Rural Revitalization Helps Push for Three Sector Integration Development,” *Yibin News*, June 9, 2018, <http://www.ybxww.com/news/html/201806/327445.shtml>

This discursive shift corresponded with two developments on the physical landscape. The first is the emergence of "health and healing" (康养) facilities, which pushed agro-tourism towards a social reproductive function, and the second is the expansion and upgrading of smaller tourism sites within Dayan Mountain, which turned more landscape beyond the tea resort proper into landscape of consumption. As early as late 2016, Yunfeng Lake tourism company – the one that collaborated with county government on building the flower garden and resort village in Dayan in 2015-16 – registered a new subsidiary in Dawu village called Yunfeng Hu Elderly Apartment company. From mid-2017 to mid-2018, the subsidiary company constructed an elderly care and vacation resort apartment complex with 100 bed slots next to Yunfeng lake, the flower garden, and Zaobaijian's black tea estate. A second investment of 20 million was later slated for expanding the apartment complex with an additional 200 slots⁷⁰. In addition, the county and township government implemented a series of upgrading of tourism infrastructure in an effort to achieve AAAA-level designation in 2018, including solidifying (优化) 10.9 km of road in and out of Dayan resort, beautifying and greenifying existing roads, building more public toilets and implementing a trash recycling system, renovating and beautifying 200 farmhouses, and invest in more eateries and cottages. All this amounted to 24.5 million RMB of (mostly) government investment. In addition, 33.61 million government spending went to developing smaller tourist sites to complement the core Dayan tea scenic resort, including 980 hectares of U-pick fruit garden for visitors, rock-climbing and rafting facilities, a swimming pool, and financial support for Yunfeng and Linfeng's vacation resorts⁷¹.

These developments – the emergence and expansion of a health/healing industry, the upgrading and expansion of tourism and resort, and the support of sector integration and the “countryside complex” imaginary associated with rural revitalization – are facilitated by and intertwined with Zaobaijian's vision to upgrade and reorient the Dayan Mountain base. In October 2018, Zaobaijian and Sichuan Justbon Asset Management Corporation signed a contract to jointly undertake the Dayan Mountain countryside/tea park complex project (大雁岭田 (茶)

⁷⁰ “Home”, Yunfeng Lake Vacation Retirement Apartment, Inc., accessed May 7, 2023, <http://ybyfh.cn/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=lists&catid=1>

⁷¹ Dong Tu, “Rural Revitalization.”

园综合体)。Justbon is a property management corporation that holds leadership positions in the national and Sichuan provincial property management associations. The two companies committed 800 million RMB to the Dayan Mountain tea park complex across three stages of development. Stage one (140 million RMB) involves building another 6000 hectares of standardized scenic tea parks, two automated tea processing factories of 1000 ton capacities each, a new tea R&D center, and associated water, electricity, internet, and road infrastructures. This stage – at least the 6000 hectares of scenic tea parks – had started before the official signing of the contract and was nearing completion by mid-2018. Stage two (120 million) is targeted at agro-tourism and includes the whole gamut of tourist site development, including parking areas, hotels and cottages, sports and event facilities, ecological parks, gardens etc. This is the stage that Tu Dong, Dawo’s party secretary, described that the township had been actively helping with. Stage one and two have officially completed by mid-2019. Stage three (540 million) is focused on “leisure and health”, and began construction in 2019. The companies and township plan on developing 500 hectares of commercial areas for tea culture exhibition and entertainment, care providing and health services, and bed & breakfast style complexes⁷². In December 2018, Zaobaijian further met with county government leaders for financial and directional support⁷³. In 2019, Dayan Mountain countryside/tea park complex project became a provincial-level key project, and Zaobaijian’s transformation into a company specializing in both tea production and tea tourism – thus integrating three sectors – was complete. Relying on the expansion of Dayan Mountain, Dawo town’s political status rose as well and was slated to become a second center of county-level economic development at the county party committee’s 14th conference⁷⁴.

⁷² Yi He, “Zaobaijian Group Unites with Justbon to Build Dayan Mountain Countryside/Tea Park Complex”, *Union China*, October 26, 2018, http://union.china.com.cn/jdnews/txt/2018-10/26/content_40550338.html

⁷³ “Huang Xiuguo Inspects Dayan Mountain Countryside/Tea Park Complex Project,” Gaoxian Government, December 7, 2018, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/gxyw/201812/t20181207_884700.html

⁷⁴ Yi He, “Zaobaijian Precise Poverty Alleviation Makes Real Progress, Three Sector Integration Pushes for Rural Revitalization”, *Union China*, September 9, 2019, http://union.china.com.cn/jdnews/txt/2019-09/09/content_40889455.html

In July 2020, Dayan Mountain was officially approved by Yibin city as a national AAAA-level tourism site⁷⁵. Its tourism sector continues to draw in corporate and government capital, and as a modern agricultural production base it plays an integral role in the southern Sichuan tea sector and the provincial and national initiatives of agricultural development. Compared to 2011, the Dayan Mountain of 2020 has matured as a site of capital accumulation. Its material and social landscape has been produced and reproduced by different forms of capital, and it firmly made Dawo town a legible and productive site of the expanded reproduction of capital.

As a county with a strong agricultural – that is, productive – base, Gaoxian’s path to turning its productive landscape into a consumptive one was fairly linear. However, there are other counties in China that do not have a strong productive base. Do these counties also see the intertwining of production and consumption as a viable development strategy? I now turn to a second case study, Chongyi county in Jiangxi province, through which one can discern a different form of this development logic. Instead of pushing from production to consumption, Chongyi adopted the logic inversely to turn its landscape of consumption into one of production.

Chongyi: The Competitive Terrain of Ecological Tourism

Chongyi county is one of 13 counties under Ganzhou city, which is the southern-most city of Jiangxi province bordering Guangdong province to the south and Hunan to the west. Chongyi is at the western tip of Ganzhou’s jurisdiction, sharing borders with mostly Hunan province. The county, typical to Jiangxi province, is very forest-heavy – forest coverage estimates vary but are generally above 85% in 2000s, and even higher in 2010s with forest replanting efforts. It is also a mountainous landscape, with nearly 50% of its area above 500 meters and over 90% above 300 meters. Water resource is very abundant, as the county is close to the origin of the Gan river, the largest river in Jiangxi. The county’s climate is warm and humid, but with significant variations depending on altitude⁷⁶. This meant that the county, true to

⁷⁵ “Gaoxian Dayan Mountain Creates National 4A-Level Tourism Site Reviewed by the City”, Gaoxian Government, August 11, 2020, http://www.gaoxian.gov.cn/zwgk/bmdt/202008/t20200803_1319151.html

⁷⁶ “Natural Geography,” Chongyi Government, accessed May 7, 2023, <http://www.chongyi.gov.cn/cyxrmzf/c103695/tt.shtml>

its place in a province nicknamed “the home of fish and rice”, is suitable for rice cultivation. Indeed, rice was the core crop of the county, but it also cultivated specialized fruits such as navel oranges and sour dates in the 2000s, and later also spine grapes. These fruits all were important to the incubation of local agro-businesses in the late 2000s and 2010s.

However, unlike Gaoxian, agriculture is not a traditional strength of Chongyi. Instead, the key pillars of Chongyi’s economy throughout most of the 2000s are mining, forestry, and water electricity⁷⁷. Tungsten mining, in particular, was Chongyi’s core industry during this decade⁷⁸. In fact, much of southern Jiangxi is known for its rare metal deposit, particularly Tungsten. The reliance on natural resources is fairly common in southern Jiangxi in the 2000s. However, mining clearly was not a sustainable industry. Suffering from the hollowing out of rural agriculture common to many places in China, and without comparative advantage for developing industry, what other sectors can Chongyi look for to grow its economy? This was the problem facing not just Chongyi but also many counties around Jiangxi, and, like these other counties, Chongyi turned to tourism.

Jiangxi’s Tourism Strategy

Whereas Gaoxian had a strength of agriculture on which to launch its transformation into a landscape of consumption, Chongyi county in Southern Jiangxi had been intentionally trying to transform itself into a tourism site since the late 2000s. However, being situated in a province where tourism was a province-wide strategy, it found itself struggling to be competitive and having to try many different ways of self-commodification. Our narrative of Chongyi, therefore, must give more attention to the competitive terrain of tourism in Jiangxi.

Jiangxi province had been trying to steer itself towards ecological development, and particularly ecological tourism, since the late 2000s. In 2007, Jiangxi’s Poyang county, home to China’s largest fresh water lake with the same name, began considering making use of this lake

⁷⁷ “Chongyi County Macroeconomics and Social Development Statistics,” *Investment Statistics*, accessed May 7, 2023, <http://d.ocn.com.cn/area/jiangxi/chongyixian.shtml>

⁷⁸ “Adopting ‘Rejuvenating Green and Tourism’ Strategy, Chongyi Breaks Reliance on Mining,” Chongyi Government, February 2009, <http://www.chongyi.gov.cn/cyxrmzf/jryd/200902/9e6ff30969d04983b79f30c6f71e413b.shtml>

for economic development without breaking ecological guidelines. In 2008, it applied to the provincial level to construct a Poyang lake wetland park ecological tourism site⁷⁹. The province at this time was hoping to change its reliance on mining in face of the 2008 global financial crisis that hit the mining industry, as well as the increasing weight put on environment protection by the central government. The ecological tourism strategy from Poyang county became a cue to begin tilting provincial development towards its (existing but previously less importance) tourism industry, and Jiangxi soon released guidelines for ecological tourism development and began constructing several ecological tourism sites. In 2009, Jiangxi applied to the State Council to make the Poyang Lake Ecological Economic Region a national strategic development project, and was approved at the end of the year⁸⁰.

2009-2010 was also a time when ecological tourism was catching the attention of those in the tourism sector nation-wide as a new growth point⁸¹, and when forest recovery and replanting (and greenification in general) was a national mandate. Ecological tourism thus entered into the province's main development repertoire, and rapidly gained strategic traction. In January 2011, Jiangxi province inaugurated a national publicity campaign titled "Jiangxi's scenery is uniquely beautiful" (江西风景独好), bundling together a series of tourism sites, including the ecological sites Lu Mountain and Poyang Lake, the religious sites Sanqing mountain and Longhu mountain, and the traditional ceramic production town Jingde, and produced the first province-wide publicity film. It then spent 25 million RMB to air the film on the central CCTV variety and news channels for a full year. These significant gestures attracted the attention of the tourism industry, and in early 2011 more than 200 tourism agencies (particularly from southern China, and some from southeast Asia) came to Jiangxi looking for collaborations. Cities all over the province also began planning major tourism advertisement tours in other provinces⁸². In the provincial tourism development conference in March 2011, the governor emphasized that the

⁷⁹ Ruoxu Yan and Haipeng Cao, "Poyang Ecological Tourism 'Born From Nothing'," *Jiangxi Daily*, May 1, 2011, 1

⁸⁰ Jin Zhang, "100 billion RMB, the Exclamation Point of Jiangxi's Development," *Jiangxi Daily*, December 20, 2011, B02

⁸¹ "Ecological Tourism," *China Green News*, November 17, 2009

⁸² Jin Zhang, "Jiangxi Tourism Gather Attention Through Collective Publicity," *Jiangxi Daily*, March 7, 2011, B01.

tourism industry is Jiangxi's pivot to economic restructuring. He set the goal of 100 billion RMB of total tourism revenue for year 2011, and emphasized branding the province as "the red cradle, the green homeland, the sightseeing, vacation, and leisure tourism resort"⁸³ – thus the direction of revolutionary and ecological tourism was cemented.

The province ultimately saw in 2011 110.6 billion RMB in total tourism revenue, a significant 35.15% increase from 2010⁸⁴. In 2012, the province's tourism work meeting further emphasized revolutionary and ecological tourism as the main direction⁸⁵. Perhaps the most significant change, however, came in September 2013, when the provincial standing committee congress meeting passed "Opinions on Building a Strong Tourism Province" (关于推进旅游强省的若干意见). Strong tourism province's important status was solidified when the provincial party secretary emphasized the same month when inspecting several tourism sites that "we must develop tourism like we develop industrialization and urbanization"⁸⁶. This elevation of tourism to the same level as two of the most important dimensions of economic development linked cadre evaluation to tourism and ecological protection in addition to GDP growth, and poured oil into the already burning fire of counties trying to turn their resources into tourism sites. This was the general historical context of Chongyi's rocky road of tourism development.

Chongyi's Early Explorations (2008 – 2013)

As mentioned before, Chongyi county's economy relied heavily on natural resources, being one of the few counties under Ganzhou city that did not have an industrial park in the 2000s. Tungsten mining was Chongyi's major economic pillar during this time, constituting over half of the county's revenue in mid-2000s. With the 2008 hit to the mining industry and the new provincial strategy of ecological development centered around Poyang lake, Chongyi jumped on

⁸³ Rong Gui and Jin Zhang, "Provincial Tourism Development Discussion Conference Begins," *Jiangxi Daily*, March 19, 2011, 001.

⁸⁴ Jin Zhang, "Rapid Progress in Jiangxi's Tourism Industry," *Jiangxi Daily*, February 1, 2012, A01.

⁸⁵ Jin Zhang and Duanlang Zhong, "Provincial Tourism Work Conference Begins," *Jiangxi Daily*, February 16, 2012, A02.

⁸⁶ Yong Liu, "Must Develop Tourism Like Industrialization And Urbanization", *Jiangxi Daily*, September 24, 2013, A01.

the wagon and announced a “rejuvenate green and tourism” (兴绿兴游) development strategy in 2008, which meant boosting forestry industry and ecological tourism without abandoning Tungsten mining⁸⁷. The county pushed for both replanting forests damaged by mining, and greenifying villages and towns both as part of the “constructing a socialist new countryside” initiative and as a strategy of cultivating an environment conducive to leisure tourism. The county aimed in 2009 to plant 145,300 hectares of new forest by the end of 2010 and to increase forest coverage from 85.7% to 86.64%⁸⁸. It also closed down over two dozen enterprises deemed too polluting in 2008-2009, and directed resources towards four tourism sites that the county identified as having most potential. These are Yangling National Forest Park at the center of the county, Doushui water reservoir in the northeast, Niedu solutional caves to the southwest, and Shangbao terrace rice fields/Qiyun mountains (counted as the same site) to the northwest⁸⁹.

In conceptualizing the “rejuvenate green and tourism” strategy, the county identified, following Ganzhou city’s tourism strategy, the Pearl River Delta as the target market, and began pushing for tourism in various dimensions. The county slated 35 million RMB in 2009 for developing the tourism infrastructure of Yangling National Forest Park, which had been approved as an AAAA-level national forest scenic site by the central Forestry Bureau in 2006. Developing Yangling’s tourism infrastructure was the first priority project that Chongyi submitted as Ganzhou city’s application for provincial funds in early 2009, and in April 2009 cadres from the provincial development and reform committee, road bureau, and tourism bureau came to inspect and approve the infrastructural construction in and around Yangling and began allocating funds to Chongyi county. The province also approved and began planning to connect Yangling to the provincial highway system. By the end of 2009, Chongyi’s Yangling project, which asked for an investment of 46.07 million RMB, was entered into the provincial development and reform committee’s project list and was awaiting approval from NDRC.

⁸⁷ Chongyi Government, “Adopting.”

⁸⁸ “Building Forest and Greenify, the ‘One Big and Four Small’ Construction,” Chongyi Government, accessed May 7, 2023, <http://www.chongyi.gov.cn/cyxrmzf/jryd/200902/b6c1fc65cb44427c8497ffae70bce74a.shtml>

⁸⁹ “Chongyi ‘Rejuvenate Green and Tourism’, Augmenting ‘Green Economy’,” Jiangxi Government, May 30, 2009, http://www.jiangxi.gov.cn/art/2009/5/30/art_399_173586.html

Chongyi also signed a contract with the Shanghai Shengtai Investment Group to develop Yangling as a tourism site, which entailed another investment of 155 million RMB⁹⁰.

Yangling was the primary, although not the only, tourism site that Chongyi was trying to develop at this point. The county also invested 54.85 million RMB for extending the provincial highway to Niedu caves from 2008-2009⁹¹. Doushui water reservoir also saw investments in road building, and the county leased a hectare of land around the reservoir and 2000 m² of water surface to a local company to develop a water park and lake resort⁹². These projects continued into 2010, along with the county's continuing efforts to replant forests and consolidate and upgrade the Tungsten mining industry. In 2009 and 2010, the county hosted two "green ecological tourism culture festival" centered on Yangling in an effort to attract tourists.

These may sound like promising developments on their own, but nearly all counties in Ganzhou city – and Jiangxi province in general – were doing similar things at this time. Within this competitive landscape, Chongyi was unable to stand out. There was little political and media attention given to Chongyi's efforts at the Ganzhou city and Jiangxi provincial level at this time. In fact, the collective craze to develop ecological tourism in the southern Jiangxi counties attracted criticism. Citing leaders in Ganzhou tourism industry and university professors, a May 2011 article in *Jiangxi Daily* pointed out that there has been a rush to host tourism festivals among the city's counties since 2007, with most of them focused on advertising ecological tourism, but most of these had limited efficacy in boosting local tourism, and the annual tourism festivals are often short-lived attempts. Chongyi and a few of its neighboring counties such as Dayu were explicitly named. Instead, the article suggests that Ganzhou should assemble a coherent tourism strategy and develop a clear division of labor among its counties⁹³.

⁹⁰ "Major Projects Report," Chongyi Government, September 1, 2009, <http://www.chongyi.gov.cn/cyxxxgk/cy8186/201007/3e3519c00c9644b8a66491b1f655a3f2.shtml>

⁹¹ Chongyi Government, "Adopting."

⁹² "Records of Chongyi Investing All-In to Ecological Tourism", *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, November 14, 2009.

⁹³ Shanhan Zhou and Jian Liang, "Southern Jiangxi Tourism is Waiting to Deliver a Collective Blow," *Jiangxi Daily*, May 12, 2011, C03

This article's suggestion was not a singular event. 2011 saw Ganzhou city begin to consolidate and develop structure for its tourism industry. As the province in March 2011 made a clear target of 100 billion tourism revenue and identifying "red" and "green" as the major tourism directions⁹⁴, and as Ganzhou was receiving word of the soon-to-be-released State Council "Opinions on central Soviet region development" that identified southern Jiangxi as "important ecological barrier" of southern China, Ganzhou began partitioning its counties to focus on four tourism areas: revolutionary culture, Hakka culture, Song dynasty city remains, and ecological tourism. Chongyi, having little resource in the first three areas, was naturally slated to be part of Ganzhou's ecological tourism strategy, along with some of its neighboring counties⁹⁵. In the series of tourism projects that Chongyi tried to develop, Yangling National Forest Park and, to a lesser extent, Doushui water reservoir were the only ones that received political attention and support from Ganzhou city. This focus on ecological tourism stems out of Ganzhou's particular self-branding as a social reproductive site targeting the highly urbanized coastal China region. In Ganzhou's 12th Five Year Plan on tourism in late 2011, it clearly articulated a strategy of "constructing a tourism back garden for Guangzhou, Hongkong, Macao, Fujian, and Taiwan", arguing that these "coastal developed urban areas have developed economies, but limited tourism and especially green and ecological resources, which is precisely Ganzhou's comparative advantage"⁹⁶.

With only Yangling National Forest Park (and tentatively a water reservoir) acknowledged as a local attraction, things were not looking great for Chongyi as the tourism competition grew heated. 2011-2012 saw counties all over Jiangxi trying to diversify ecological tourism beyond simple sightseeing – counties that used their ecological tourism advantage to develop rural bed and breakfasts and tourism farms, and those that combined tourism with agriculture to develop modern ecological agriculture parks, were the subject of commendation by both provincial and city governments, evidenced in increasing official media coverage of these

⁹⁴ Gui and Zhang, "Provincial Tourism Development."

⁹⁵ Zhou and Liang, "Southern Jiangxi Tourism."

⁹⁶ Duanlang Zhong and Liqun Chen, "Tourism Helps Develop Ganzhou's Economy," *Jiangxi Daily*, July 9, 2012, A02

counties and approvals from visiting leaders. In other words, the extraordinarily competitive landscape of ecological tourism in Jiangxi – this is, after all, one of the most forest-heavy provinces in China – was pressuring counties to move beyond branding themselves as merely landscapes of consumption (i.e. sightseeing) and into cultivating productive or socially reproductive functions. Chongyi’s efforts to develop water parks and resorts – early gestures towards this transformation – were insufficiently competitive in this province-wide shift. Changes in 2013, furthermore, mandated Chongyi to re-examine its tourism strategy.

Changing Tourism Logic: New Tourism Plan and Shangbao Terrace Fields (2013-2015)

The necessity of reconceptualizing ecological tourism from one based on sightseeing to one based on other, re/productive functions received new impetus in 2013 in two ways. First, a State Council approved “Plan for Luoxiao Mountains Regional Development and Poverty Alleviation 2011-2020” (hereafter “Luoxiao mountain regional plan”) was released in February 2013. Similar to the Wumeng mountain regional plan, the Luoxiao mountain regional plan was a cross-provincial development guiding document. It covered 24 counties in Jiangxi and Hunan, including a big swarth of Ganzhou city’s counties. Although Chongyi was not officially part of the plan, it was impacted as the plan influenced Ganzhou’s development strategy. Among the guidelines and strategies outlined in the Luoxiao mountain regional plan are developing and protecting local ecology, boosting agriculture, and cutting poverty population in half. Significantly, one of the ways the plan was to achieve this was making the Luoxiao mountain region an “experimental region for national poverty alleviation through tourism” (国家旅游扶贫试验区), “national ecological tourism demonstration region” (国家生态旅游示范区) and “national tourism and vacation pioneering demonstration region” (国家级旅游度假先行示范区). Ganzhou city in particular was to be the “regional tourism service center” and a posterchild for the region. Revolutionary tourism was the primary focus area of the plan, although ecological tourism was clearly a close second⁹⁷. It is therefore not enough for tourism to simply boost county income – it now has to be an integral part of rural development and poverty alleviation, which meant tourism must somehow interface with more rural productive activities.

⁹⁷ “A Historical Opportunity for Ganzhou’s Poverty Alleviation,” *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, February 23, 2012.

A second impetus came from Jiangxi province, which, as mentioned, revealed the official “constructing a strong tourism province” campaign in early 2013. The cornerstone of this campaign was the upgrading of the tourism industry from “ticket economy” (referring to tickets sold at the gates of scenic areas) to “diverse economy”, and from “sightseeing tourism” to “leisure and vacation” tourism, including “experience, cultural, and health tourism”. As the Wuning county magistrate announced in a group interview with the provincial tourism bureau and forestry bureau chiefs, simply having well-protected ecological resources was not enough to develop economies – counties must also somehow connect these resources to different industrial and productive economic activities⁹⁸. Associated with this change was the increasing attention given at the provincial level to specifically rural tourism. In October 2013, the provincial development and reform committee and the tourism bureau jointly released “Jiangxi Rural Tourism Development plan 2013-2017”, which explicitly stressed building up Jiangxi as a famous rural tourism province. A swarth of rural tourism support policies also mushroomed from 2011-2013. Ganzhou’s focus also pivoted in August 2013 from simply cultivating major “red” and “green” tourist sites to developing “leisure agriculture and rural tourism demonstration counties, feature site tourism towns and villages, A-level rural tourism sites, and star-level rural hotels”⁹⁹.

Under these developments, Chongyi reorganized its tourism strategy in 2013. Echoing Jiangxi province’s elevation of tourism to the level of industrialization and urbanization, Chongyi placed tourism with mining, forestry, and food processing as the four major industries to nurture, set up an annual 10 million RMB tourism-specific fund, began constructing a “national tourism poverty alleviation experimental region”, and unveiled a new plan – developed in collaboration with an outside tourism planning company – to build the entire county into an ecological theme park. This elaborate plan had three components: the “dragon-head” remained Yangling National Forest Park; the second-tier sites or “two wings” are Shangbao rice terrace fields and a hot spring resort near Doushui lake; the “three backup teams” are Qiyun mountains,

⁹⁸ Zhihai Liu, “Constructing a Province of Ecological Civilization”, *Jiangxi Daily*, July 9, 2013, A03.

⁹⁹ Feifei Xin, “Ganzhou City to Improve Rural Tourism Development,” *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, August 8, 2013, 002.

Junzi Valley, and Niedu caves. The county's tourism industry developed a detailed two-day itinerary covering these sites, and directed resources to focus on building up Yangling, Doushui lake, Shangbao terrace fields and Junzi Valley. A county tourism newspaper, website, and television channel also went up. A closer look at the sites named in the plan and their subsequent development will reveal the change in the county's tourism logic from one based on landscape of consumption to one based on landscape of both production and consumption¹⁰⁰. Here I examine mostly Shangbao terrace fields, as information on this site is most extensive, but a brief discussion of how the other sites illustrate similar logics will take place at the end of the subsection.

Shangbao terrace rice fields, one of the “two wings” tier of the county's plan, are located in Shangbao township. The terrace fields were documented as early as in Ming dynasty by the local magistrate to be agricultural remains built by Hakka migrants from Guangdong, and parts of it were still active sites of rice production in early 2010s. The county had identified it as a tourism cultivation site back in 2008, but it received relatively little attention and resource compared to Yangling and even Qiyun mountains, as the county was focused on developing natural landscape sightseeing at the time. By 2012 Shangbao terrace fields still did not have tourism infrastructure and service systems in place, and Shangbao township relied more on agricultural outputs of tea and rice rather than tourism. However, with the provincial shift away from simple natural sightseeing, the tourism potential of Shangbao terrace fields also received a closer look. In 2013, Chongyi county finally planned a parking lot and gate at Shangbao fields, spent 500,000 RMB to prepare the fields for tourism, launched a “bed and breakfast tourism village” development project, and tentatively planted 230 hectares of scenic turnip rape around the fields¹⁰¹. Shangbao township was greatly encouraged. It continued expanding rice production, gave its rice a “High Hills Terrace Fields” brand, invited Ganzhou television channel to come shoot a publicity film for Shangbao, mobilized villagers to plant turnip rape for future tourism purposes, and successfully applied to Jiangxi Agricultural Department to be a

¹⁰⁰ Jiaqin Huang and Jin Ye, “Chongyi Skillfully Augments Tourism,” *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, May 13, 2013, 001.

¹⁰¹ Chongyi County Tourism Bureau, “2013 County Ecological Tourism Work Report”, *Records of Chongyi county Party Committee*, 2013

“Provincial Leisure Agriculture Demonstration site”. It also spent 1.3 million RMB building tourism infrastructures (viewing platforms and parking lots) for its terrace fields, “beautified” 16 Hakka-style farmer houses around the fields, and developed instructions for those cultivating rice on the core scenic (i.e. tourist-facing) terrace fields¹⁰². The township’s twin economic priorities of agriculture and tourism was beginning to come together as agro-tourism.

In 2013, the county’s investment in Shangbao (500,000 RMB) was dwarfed by its investment in Yangling (5 million RMB), and in the annual county report on ecological tourism Shangbao was also given much less attention than Yangling¹⁰³. This began changing in 2014. Not that investment in Yangling has stopped or significantly slowed, but Shangbao rice fields had, true to its designation as a “two wing” tourism site, clearly become a new focus point for the county. The county began a collective tourism plan for Shangbao fields and Qiyun mountain (the two sites are very close to each other) that required 2 million RMB, for which the county applied for Ganzhou city’s tourism funds. 50 million RMB was additionally slated for developing Shangbao and Qiyun mountain’s tourism infrastructure, particularly roads, and another 2.1 million was being used towards repairing roads leading to Shangbao specifically. The county also managed to squeeze two of Shangbao’s villages into the national list of tourism poverty alleviation key village/township. In the county’s tourism workplan for 2015, the first priority project was “begin constructing Shangbao terrace fields into an AAAA-level tourism site”¹⁰⁴. Shangbao county’s main economic development pillar also turned in 2014 from agriculture to tourism – in its annual work report, for instance, ecological tourism was ranked in terms of both investment and accomplishments before tea and rice production. It invested 5 million in building tourism infrastructures, nearly quadrupling its 2013 investment, and mobilized 63 farm families to offer bed & breakfast and restaurants. Riding on the overall tourism success, Shangbao county also began trying to turn its tea farms into tourist sites similar to Dayan mountains, encouraging its two tea companies to invest in building tourism reception centers. It also successfully

¹⁰² Shangbao Township Party Committee, “Augmenting Ecological Tourism Brand, Creating China’s Most Beautiful Countryside”, *Records of Chongyi County Party Committee*, 2013

¹⁰³ Chongyi County Tourism Bureau, “2013 County.”

¹⁰⁴ Chongyi County Tourism Bureau, “2014 County Ecological Tourism Work Report”, *Records of Chongyi County Party Committee*, 2014

obtained a title of “beautiful countryside” for its terrace fields from the National Agricultural Department, which it used to boost its organic rice brand value¹⁰⁵.

2015 saw Chongyi began constructing the 4A-level Shangbao terrace fields. The county hired a tourism planning team from Yunnan University and developed concrete operation plans, began selling tickets for the terrace field sites, and continued improving its infrastructure. It also successfully lobbied the province for a terrace field tourism highway costing 54 million¹⁰⁶. Shangbao township also accelerated the transformation of not just the terrace field site but also all around its township, building roads, bridges, parking lots, trails, Hakka-style villages etc. With the increasing fame of its organic rice brand that relied on the fame of terrace fields, the township also managed to attract three rice companies to set up production bases and contract with local rice farmers. Most importantly, the township launched a project of terrace field recultivation aiming to increase the area of terrace fields active for rice farming. To both meet the production needs of the expanding rice sector (i.e. the three new companies) and to channel more capital into developing the terrace field site, Shangbao launched education campaigns and monetary incentives to mobilize farmers to protect active and re-cultivate non-active terrace fields, adding 226 acres of active fields by the end of the year¹⁰⁷. Re-cultivation would come to occupy a central position in developing Shangbao in the late 2010s.

Beyond Shangbao, other sites in the county’s new tourism plan illustrate a similar logic of turning from sites of passive natural landscape sightseeing to sites that also incorporate other, active functions. The bulk of the investment in Yangling, for instance, were channeled to building vacation resorts and health-related facilities that frame the forest park as less a sightseeing place and more a place of leisure social reproduction. Doushui lake also turned away from an ecological sightseeing strategy to focus on hot spring resorts¹⁰⁸. Qiyun mountain, in

¹⁰⁵ Shangbao Township Party Committee, “Develop Tourism and Create an Ecological Jewel County, Develop Economy and Enrich Livelihoods”, *Records of Chongyi County Party Committee*, 2014

¹⁰⁶ Chongyi County Tourism Bureau, “2015 County Ecological Tourism Work Report”, *Records of Chongyi County Party Committee*, 2015

¹⁰⁷ Shangbao Township Party Committee, “Ecological Tourism Accelerate Development and Building the Dream of Being Moderately Prosperous,” *Records of Chongyi County Party Committee*, 2015

¹⁰⁸ Chongyi County Tourism Bureau, “2015 County.”

particular, deserve some particular attention, as its pivot in strategy illustrate how productive functions became a leverage for building up landscapes of consumption.

Qiyun mountains had been among the main tourism sites mentioned in late 2000s, but its actual attraction changed in the 2013 plan. In 2008-2009, Qiyun mountains was considered with Yangling and Doushui lake as part of the ecological sightseeing development, and the county pushed for Qiyun mountains to be a national forest protection site, aiming to turn it into a second Yangling. This did not go very well; cobbling together the 2.86 million needed for applying for national protected site took more than a year, and with the competitiveness of the application process (a 25% approval rate in 2009) that necessitates county cadre trips to Beijing, it wouldn't be until 2012 that the application gets approved¹⁰⁹. Indeed, the Qiyun mountains included in the plan received its place not (or at least not primarily) from its status as a Yangling-style forest park, but more from the fame of the Chongyi agro- and food-processing enterprise, Qiyun Mountain Food Inc., and particularly from its famous product, the Qiyun Mountain Southern Sour Date Jelly-cake (齐云山南酸枣糕). Qiyun Mountain Food was selected to be incubated as a provincial-level dragon-head agro-business in 2005, and in 2010 was one of the main green ecological food brands that Chongyi spend its annual 8.1 million RMB agricultural enterprise-support fund on. Its signature jelly-cake sources its main raw material, southern sour dates, from Qiyun mountain, which is (at least allegedly) the only source of southern sour dates in the country. In 2014, Qiyun Mountain Food's jelly-cake was framed as a prominent example of "beautiful scenery birthing gourmet food" within the tourism advertisement of the county¹¹⁰. Thus, Qiyun Mountains' value as a tourist site within the county's vision diverged from a place of only ecological sightseeing to a place of distinctive agricultural and food product. The same logic holds for Junzi Valley, which is a valley of fruit trees that supplies the local agro-business Junzi Valley Wine that was also developed to host sightseeing and U-pick activities¹¹¹. In 2013,

¹⁰⁹ Chongyi Government, "Major Projects."

¹¹⁰ Shanggui Huang and Jin Ye, "Green Exclamation Point: Chongyi Develop Ecological Tourism," *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, January 18, 2014, 001.

¹¹¹ Qifeng Li, "Chongyi Industry Becomes Ecological and Helps Restructure Development," *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, September 8, 2014, 001.

Qiyun Mountain and Junzi Valley are designated as core “ecological tourism food” companies as a key part of Chongyi’s overall ecological development package¹¹².

From Consumption to Production and Back Again: Recultivating Shangbao Terrace Fields (2016-2021)

In 2016, Chongyi reframed its tourism strategy as “full territory tourism” (全域旅游), referring to the penetration of tourism concerns in all aspects of construction and development. The slogan was “make projects out of development, make ecology out of industry, make scenic sites out of construction, and make informatization out of service” (发展项目化、产业生态化、建设景区化、服务信息化). The county continued to find bidders and sign contracts with tourism companies for its tourist sites, as well as furnishing tourism infrastructure in Yangling, Shangbao, and Junzi valley¹¹³. What deserve particular attention is the push for scenic agriculture in Shangbao that made an explicit connection between a productive and a consumptive landscape.

In 2016, Chongyi county spent 200,000 RMB to recultivate 100 hectares of terrace fields in Shangbao, 30,000 RMB on water infrastructure to facilitate terrace field agriculture, and mobilized Shangbao villagers to plant 500 fruit trees and 20 hectares of lotus flowers around the township in order to “strengthen scenic construction...and combine scenic value with economic value”¹¹⁴. Shangbao township in 2016 also began applying to UN Food and Agriculture Organization for a “Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems” designation, and began actively investing in tourism infrastructure related to its tea farms in addition to terrace fields, including completing two scenic highways surrounding the tea fields of its two main tea companies¹¹⁵. 2017 saw the county passing a detailed plan to upgrade Shangbao terrace fields,

¹¹² Huang and Ye, “Green Exclamation Point.”

¹¹³ Chongyi County Tourism Bureau, “2016 County Ecological Tourism Work Report”, *Records of Chongyi County Party Committee*, 2016

¹¹⁴ Chongyi County Tourism Bureau, “2016 County.”

¹¹⁵ Shangbao Township Party Committee, “Developing Full Territory Tourism and Constructing a Famous Rural Tourism Township”, *Records of Chongyi County Party Committee*, 2016

and investing 50 million RMB to fix up the six villages within the terrace fields' core scenic site to fit the Hakka style, in addition to continuing to encourage and incentivize rice agriculture on the terrace fields. This included monetary subsidy to rice farmers who actively cultivate in the terrace fields core scenic areas, a 300 RMB/hectare incentive to farmers to take up and begin recultivating inactive terrace fields in the core scenic areas, and an end to subsidies to those who leased fields but do not cultivate on it. The strong push towards recultivation was aimed at “protecting the terrace fields’ ecology and restoring the natural sight of terrace fields”. In 2018, determined to put an end to inactive terrace fields, Chongyi county’s tourism investment company – Jiangxi Zhangjiangyuan Tourism Inc. – registered a terrace field agriculture subsidiary and contracted with farmers in the core scenic regions. The company leased all of the inactive terrace fields in the hands of farmers and paid 20 years of rent upfront (300 RMB per hectare per year)¹¹⁶, then offered a salary of 1650 RMB/hectare to employ farmers to cultivate these terrace fields¹¹⁷. In 2018 this incentivized 51 farmer families to recultivate over 600 hectares of terrace fields, increasing the total area of recultivated terrace fields to over 2000 hectares, basically eliminating abandoned terrace fields in the core scenic site¹¹⁸.

There are several reasons why Chongyi and Shangbao were determined to put all the terrace fields back into active agriculture. First is that the fields need to be actively maintained by farmers if the scenic site was to be sustainable – different from Yangling, where the attraction was supposedly untouched nature, the attraction of Shangbao terrace fields lies precisely in its identity as an agricultural site. Furthermore, with the application for UN agricultural heritage system designation (ultimately approved in April 2018), Chongyi needed to be more active in protecting and maintaining this “heritage”. The second reason was the necessity of integrating tourism development with poverty alleviation. Since Chongyi had managed to get two Shangbao villages next to the terrace fields designated as tourism poverty alleviation experiment villages, it

¹¹⁶ Shibing Qiu and Zhonghui Zou, “Chongyi: Integrating Tourism and Agriculture, Expanding Ways to Enrich Farmers”, *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, May 27, 2021, 003.

¹¹⁷ Shibing Qiu, “Chongyi Builds the Most Beautiful Hakka Terrace Fields While Protecting Heritage”, *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, June 17, 2018, 001.

¹¹⁸ Xiaoyan Wang, “Several Ways that Chongyi is Instituting the ‘Strong Tourism Province’ Strategy”, *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, April 21, 2019, 003.

had to somehow connect farmers livelihoods to terrace field tourism. Finally and a particular concern of Shangbao township is the aspiration to expand the organic rice farming industry by augmenting the local rice businesses' scale of production. With actively cultivated rice fields, the township furthermore developed experiential agricultural tourism – where tourists can witness and experience ancient, Hakka-style rice cultivation – and associated activities such as fish-catching in the terrace fields. Furthermore, the inflow of (both symbolic and real) capital to the township helped expand its tea sector as well. One of its main tea agro-business, Wanchang Mountain, pivoted to a tea-tourism strategy and developed its production base for sightseeing and camping, and also expanded its tea farm sizes¹¹⁹.

In September 2020, the intertwining of production and consumption on Shangbao terrace fields took another interesting twist as Chongyi launched an agricultural crowdfunding activity online. People all over the country were invited to invest some money to “adopt” a piece of the terrace field. The terrace field cultivation company would then employ farmers to cultivate the field in the “indigenous traditional style”, and deliver the rice harvest to the investor, along with a package of different agricultural products from Chongyi and a waiver for all ticket fees and parts of hotel fees if they come visit the county¹²⁰. The investors would also be recognized as a “protector of global agricultural heritage”, “outstanding enterprise in service of rural revitalization” (in the case of business investors) and “honorary villager of Shangbao terrace field”. By the end of 2020, over 1600 hectares of the 2000+hectares of core scenic terrace fields had been “adopted”. By 2021, all the core scenic fields were adopted by over 5000 investors, and Shangbao managed to get 82 farmer families to cultivate nearly all of its core scenic fields in the “traditional style”, upgrading both its reputation of organic rice and its status as a world heritage site¹²¹.

¹¹⁹ Shan Li and Chunming Guo, “Records of How Chongyi County Shangbao Township is Constructing a Model Township”, *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, July 18, 2020, 002

¹²⁰ Qifeng Li, “Recording How Chongyi County Facilitates Three-Sector Integration and Accelerates Rural Revitalization”, *Southern Jiangxi Daily*, August 11, 2021, 001

¹²¹ “Integrating Agriculture and Tourism Facilitates Revitalization: Chongyi’s Nonprofit Crowdfunding Helps Ecological Development”, Xinfeng Government, July 8, 2022, <http://www.jxxf.gov.cn/xfxxxgk/c101222/202207/7d11364585934a639456d67cde3eeca9.shtml>

It is thus clear that Shangbao terrace fields' value as a landscape of consumption must also be attached to a robust base of production for the "consumptive" aspect to be able to sustainably leverage capital accumulation. It was the active agriculture on the terrace fields that managed to preserve the fields, continue drawing tourists, and hold up its status as a world agricultural heritage site – in other words, to maintain its core function as a landscape of consumption. In the meantime, the terrace fields also facilitated capital accumulation in other areas such as tea farming and tea tourism, thus firmly absorbing Shangbao township into capital circulation. The crowdfunding activity also revealed how the explicitly productive function of Shangbao fields can be mobilized on a more spatially expansive scale to attract capital towards the "consumptive" sector of tourism, connecting Shangbao not just to surrounding urban visitors but potentially to all urban visitors that would be intrigued by these "natural" agricultural products. Thus, it was the interfacing between production and consumption that successfully facilitated the expanded reproduction of capital in the rural township of Shangbao, and, by extension, in Chongyi.

This chapter has thus far demonstrated how the intertwining of production and consumption, or the rural commodity and the rural-as-commodity, occurs on the physical rural landscape. However, how the rural-as-commodity became a desirable commodity as such is not altogether clear. What kind of discursive shifts had to happen so that the rural, once associated with backwards environment and low-quality population, became a commodity that could attract urban consumers? The next chapter will answer this question and examine how the rural-as-commodity is constructed and facilitate by changing imaginations of the rural in the Chinese mediascape. Through this examination, the next chapter will also demonstrate how the two forms of rural commodity work together both materially and discursively to transform the countryside.

CHAPTER III:
CONSTRUCTING A NEW RURALITY:
THE RURAL-AS-COMMODITY IN VARIETY SHOWS

Introduction

What is the rural-as-commodity? Simply put, it is a simulation of the rural designed to discursively compete with, and potentially displace, previous representations of rural life. It is not (just) a representation of the rural but a simulacrum – its relationship to the material foundations of real rural life is so intricately mediated by a welter of space- and time-collapsing allusions that the relationship almost appears to be nonexistent. And yet, this relationship between the rural simulacrum and real rural life does exist, and this is what makes the former not just a free-floating symbol but a commodity, with socially produced use-value and exchange value, circulating in a burgeoning and primarily domestic market that is also socially produced. This fantastical rurality in its commodity form has two seemingly contradictory effects: it homogenizes spaces into an abstract “rural” that has no ties to particular places, and it also foregrounds certain kinds of productive differences among rural places and between the abstract categories of urban and rural so that the rural-as-commodity and the material rural commodity can reinforce each other. The dialectics of rural space embodied in the rural-as-commodity will be explored more at the end of the chapter and in the conclusion.

This chapter interrogates the rural-as-commodity, and is motivated by the question: how does the rural become desirable in contemporary China? Indeed, the tourism-led strategies explored in chapter 2 hinges on the continuous production of an urban desire for rural places. Why and how does the rural, once associated with backwardness and low-quality human resources, now take on the appearance of desirability?

Chapter 1 has elaborated on the context of this rural transformation, namely consumption-led development. In this chapter, I will scrutinize a piece of popular media artifact – a variety show named *Back to Field* (向往的生活) – to reveal what kind of rurality the rural-as-commodity touts, and how it is constructed. In the final part of the chapter, I will return to the dialectics of space under this material-discursive transformation of the rural.

The Rural-as-Commodity and Variety Shows: *Back to Field* (2017)

There are many sites and moments at which to explore how the rural-as-commodity is constructed, and variety shows may hardly seem an intuitive place to start. However, I suggest that variety show is a particularly illuminating site of reconstructing rurality in contemporary China. The following subsection will offer an overview of variety show in China's entertainment mediascape, and argue why variety show is an appropriate artifact to look to for my purposes. I will then provide an analysis of one variety show titled *Back to Field*, which first aired in 2017 and has just begun its seventh and final season in 2023, to demonstrate how the rural-as-commodity is constructed and rurality reimagined.

Variety Shows as a Point of Entry

Variety show (综艺) is a complex entertainment media genre. Although the genre originated in Great Britain, China's variety show is mostly influenced by its neighbors – first Taiwan, and later Japan and Korea. A complete history and current state of development of variety show in contemporary China is beyond the scope of this chapter, and I will only offer a brief sketch here.

In the early years of the PRC – 1950s-1970s to be exact – broadcasted entertainment media was tightly tied to the political party. Television shows, films, and radio broadcasts were monopolized by state institutions, and the explicit goal was to improve popular receptiveness of the party and disseminate certain values and ideology. This began to change during 1980s-1990s under Reform and Opening. State monopoly was relaxed, and private capital began to enter entertainment media production. With this change, the didactical nature of media products began to wane, while pure entertainment became more and more the norm. This did not mean that the state declined as an actor in entertainment media production – indeed, even today all broadcast media must be reviewed and approved by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), an institution that has experienced many reorganizations and adopted many different names in the past but still remains the sole gatekeeper to all media production. The struggle between state and private capital is a major factor influencing media products in China, which I

have explored elsewhere.¹²² Suffice to say here that the Chinese entertainment mediascape is characterized by the heavy influence of state imperatives on textual and cinematic choices in entertainment media production.

Variety show began in China during the Reform and Opening era and became an established genre around the turn of the 21st century. Early variety shows in China were influenced mostly by its Taiwan and Hong Kong counterparts, and featured activities such as singing competitions, physical competitive games among celebrities, and comedic interviews/conversations with celebrities.¹²³ One of the most iconic variety shows of this era was *Happy Camp*, which aired from 1997 to 2021. *Happy Camp* featured 5 hosts or MCs that invite celebrities to compete against each other in games each episode. This became the main template for variety shows well into the 21st century.

In the 2010s, variety show producers in China gravitated increasingly towards their Korean counterparts. This was because in the early 2010s Korean producers – with lots of inspiration and emulation of Japan – began pioneering various new templates for variety shows. The most important one for my purpose here is the “slow variety show” (慢综艺). Taking inspiration from the *iyashi* (“healing”) popular culture of Japan, slow variety show turns away from the fast-paced, comedic, games- and competition-based variety show that was dominating the Korean (and Chinese) entertainment industry and instead centers mundane everyday life, using cinematic techniques to cultivate a sense of slow, peaceful, harmonious living that feels “healing” for the audience. The pioneering Korean slow variety show was *Three Meals a Day* by tvN, with the first season airing in 2014. This show portrayed celebrities who were sent to live in a rural farmhouse and had to live off of their own agricultural labor on a daily basis. The structure of *Three Meals a Day* was copied by the production team of *Back to Field* in 2016, and the first season of *Back to Field* aired in 2017 in mainland China. While mainland fans of Korean variety shows immediately called attention to copyright infringement and plagiarism, they were

¹²² Shuxi Wu, “Television adaptation in the age of media convergence: Chinese Intellectual Property Shows and the case of All Is Well.” *Adaptation* 15, no. 2 (August 2022): 187-206.

¹²³ “The History of Mainland China's Variety Shows”, *Nostalgia*, September 1, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/S5IsfKgHXIfQd3K-cwkPQQ>

small in number and *Back to Field* was received by most Chinese audience as a novelty. The show was thus taken to be the pioneering slow variety show in mainland China.¹²⁴

Slow variety show can be considered a type of reality variety show in that the celebrity participants are shown in their supposedly “real” personality, without any acting and affectations. However, reality show is a genre that lies at the intersection of the real and the fake – while cinematic techniques and celebrity performances all aim for an appearance of “realness”, reality shows generally do have established plots and narratives that the participants need to perform as naturally as possible. Hence, while slow variety show centers everyday life and offers a semblance of real mundanity, it is still a piece of performance and a product of intentional construction. Therefore, slow variety show in China should not be examined as a representation of real life but more an intentional simulation of certain ideal types that are both entertaining enough to attract viewers and didactic enough to pass the state gatekeepers. This makes the rurality depicted in *Back to Field* a subject worthy of study – rather than a realist depiction of material rural life, rurality in variety shows are motivated constructions that arise out of certain imaginaries, and scrutinizing this rurality can shed light on what these imaginaries and motivations are. As a show that boasts seven seasons (2017-2023) and has achieved excellent ratings during its first two seasons,¹²⁵ we can also symptomatically deduce that the particular rurality in *Back to Field* is one that is both endorsed by (or at least not opposed by) mainstream state-sponsored cultural production and has certain cultural purchase with Chinese media consumers. The rest of this section will explore what kind of rurality is presented in the show.

The magical rural: Back to Field S1 (2017)

The Chinese title of *Back to Field*, “向往的生活”, translates roughly to “the life that one longs for/desires”, and is immediately reflective of what the show does: to present a life that everyone desires and longs for. This “everyone”, however, actually indicates a specific group of people upon closer examination – the urban middle class. Indeed, the show seeks to cultivate a fantastical rurality that appeals to the urban middle class who presumably knows nothing about

¹²⁴ Xian Bai, “Rural Imagination and Media Presentation in the Documentary Variety Show *Back to Field*” (MA thesis, Yunnan University, 2019).

¹²⁵ Bai, “Rural Imagination,” 4.

real rural life, and it does so by mobilizing a series of stereotypes, imaginaries, and historicist allusions. What is this fantastical rurality? What kind of strategies are used to create it? These are questions that I will answer with a closer examination of the show, focusing on the first season (hereafter *Back to Field S1*), which was filmed in the second half of 2016 and aired in early 2017.

Back to Field S1 features three celebrity hosts who go to reside in a rural village, and host a few celebrity guests each episode by receiving and entertaining them and treating them to home-made meals. The three hosts are: Huang Lei (hereafter Huang), an actor in his mid-forties whose known for playing caring paternal figures in television shows and for being cunning and knowledgeable in reality shows; He Jiong (hereafter HJ), probably the most widely recognized entertainment MC in China also in his forties, and known for being the main MC on the long-standing reality show *Happy Camp* and has a reputation of being a kind and caring person. Another association with HJ is his ambiguous sexuality, which would contribute to his maternal role in *Back to Field*. The third host is Henry Lau (hereafter Henry), an ethnic Chinese Canadian musician in his twenties who debuted as part of the South Korean boyband *Super Junior* and was trying to reorient towards the Chinese entertainment market in the 2010s. Huang and HJ have a long-standing friendship, and Henry was mostly acquainted with HJ before the show.

The three hosts' tasks are to survive in the rural setting and to accommodate each guest's meal requests as much as possible using the limited resources available in the countryside. The main drama of *Back to Field* lies along three dimensions: the three hosts' comedic struggle, as urbanites, to function productively in a rural setting, the interaction between the hosts and the guests, and the guests' reactions and activities in the countryside. In the first instance, the dramatic conflicts center around the hosts struggles in doing day-to-day farm chores like building and using a brick fireplace, harvesting corn, and chopping firewood. To accommodate the guests' meal requests, the hosts are forced to purchase food materials from the only supplier, namely the show's production team, and thereby fall into debt that needs to be paid by their corn harvest. The plotline is that the hosts gradually adapt to these chores and develop a virtuosity and attachment to rural living. The hosts also constantly and comedically negotiate with the show's production team to get more material resources such as cash money and lowering their farm debt. In the second and third dimensions, the interaction between hosts and guests usually begins with

the hosts playfully coercing their urban guests to help out with farm labor in order to pay off the debts accrued by the guests' meal requests, and the guests quickly transform from clueless, lazy urbanites to being able to appreciate the cathartic qualities of rural labor. They fall in love with the rural farmhouse, and depart the village reluctantly and sadly the next day for their urban homes. The rurality that arises from this plot also has three dimensions: as a legitimate, equal but different counterpart to the urban, as a transformative place for urban subjectivity, and as a simulation relying on historicist and literary allusion. I will now examine each of these dimensions.

Salvaging the rural: legitimate, equal, different

The rural in *Back to Field S1* is defined not based on a positive correlation with rural life but in negative correlation with the city – it is defined to be a legitimate realm of knowledge and skills, an equally comfortable and safe environment as the city is to those accustomed to urban living, and a social antidote to the urban. Thus, the rural is assembled strictly as an Other of the urban, and this largely frames what aspects of rural life is celebrated, subtly changed, or completely obscured.

This relational definition of the rural is immediately clear in the pilot episode, which portrays how the three hosts come to live in the rural village and how they establish their foothold there.¹²⁶ The episode begins by showing seeds growing in the field, then a pair of hands pulls up a daikon radish (supposedly grown from the seeds), washing away the dirt, and putting it in a basket full of bright-colored, plump-looking vegetables. The camera takes the perspective of the basket, and in an accelerated longshot, shows how the basket travels via the country roads and then the highway out of the rural village, into the city, then into a skyscraper and onto a patio, where HJ and Huang – both with well-styled hair and smart casual shirts – were getting together over some takeout and an elegant tea set. Upon seeing the basket delivery, Huang tells HJ to stop eating the unhealthy takeout food and eat some of the natural produce. While chewing on the produce, the two pulls out a phone hidden inside the basket, and proceeds to watch a short clip that frames the central theme of the show. Throughout this opening sequence, rural produce

¹²⁶ *Back to Field*, season 1, episode 0, “Pilot”, directed by Zhengyu Wang, aired January 8, 2017, MangoTV, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLqGnnroqnE>

seems to magically come into the city and to the consumers – the camera and the captions emphasize the life of the seeds growing out the field, portray only minimally the human effort needed to harvest and prepare the produce, and show the basket traveling independently into the city, eschewing any agricultural logistical chains, packaging, pricing – in short, any capitalist activities – that connects rural commodities to urban consumers. This portrayal of the rural commodity untouched by capitalism also functions as an allegory for the rural-as-commodity as a social space unburdened by urban capitalism, and will resurface continually in the later portrayal of the rural as the absence of capitalist agriculture and expropriation of labor. Furthermore, while the camera shots are metaphorical and aesthetic when filming the parts of the sequence taking place in the rural, it becomes meticulous and realist when leaving the rural and entering the city, and spends longer portraying the produce’s movement in an urban environment. This opening sequence thus frame the rural directly in opposition to the urban, and most tellingly, engages deeper with the real urban life than with the real rural life. Thus, the sequence is evidently intended for an audience who is much more acquainted with urban life and lacks any real references for understanding rural life, for whom a movie-like portrayal of seeds growing, a very vague portrayal of harvesting, and the fantastical travel of rural commodities into the cities appears more smoothing than strange.

The short video clip that HJ and Huang (and the audience) watch on the phone from the basket frames the central motivation of the show and deserves special attention. Beginning with background scenes of a fast-paced and mostly night-time urban environment, the clip’s narrator and captions cite statistics on how fast the urban demography has grown in the past decade. “But in addition to accelerated development,” the female AI-sounding narrator says, “the city also is associated with nouns like ‘pressure’, ‘impetuous’, ‘anxiety’.” The narrator then cites a vague 2016 survey of “career people”, and summarizes the result as follows: “the life that they long for is to distance themselves from the madding crowd, avoid crowded groups of people, breathe in natural air, seek and listen to the voices within their hearts”. The camera then switches from the dark, accelerated urban scenes to bright, slow, green-filled rural scenes; the background music turns from ominous to lighthearted, and on screen appears the caption: “what is life in the countryside like”? Interview quotes with three former urbanites who moved to rural areas follow. Their former occupation, along with when and where they moved to the rural are shown on

screen. They describe their own rural lives as self-sufficient, and say that they grow their own produce “completely without pollution” or fertilizer and pesticides. They source from the mountains, raise fish and chickens, and cook good food. “City people just lack these things gifted to us by nature,” one of them says, “and the relaxed mood”. These quotes are offered as voiceovers to shots portraying the interviewees walking happily in the fields, or having fun with a group of friends and family in their rural residence. The clip ends with the words: “they chose the life that they longed for. Are you willing to try this kind of life?”

What is striking about this video clip, which serves as the invitation to He and Huang as well as the audience, is how it codes the rural as middle-upper class. The three interviewees who were quoted are, respectively, a singer-musician, an internet marketing professional, and a retired bureaucrat, all originated from large cities (the first two are from Beijing, the third is from Tianjin) and with respectable careers. The rural environment that they moved to are not those of rustic farmyards and dilapidated houses— the first two are portrayed to possess well-designed and neatly aligned vegetable patches in greenhouses, and despite shots of them working in the field, they are clean and well-dressed, with no trace of dirt or sweat. The retired bureaucrat, furthermore, is portrayed to live in what seems like a rural estate, with large gardens, an upscale Chinese-style house, and fish ponds – indeed, when she is quoted to say “we raise fish and chickens”, what is shown is not edible commercial fish but a herd of aesthetic koi fish in her clean pebble pond. This video clip thus does two things. First, by beginning with the problem of urban crowds and subjectivity and following it with portrayals of the countryside, the clip explicitly supplies the rural as a response or solution to the urban. Furthermore, as the interviews are all with former urbanites who contrast what their current lives have that their former lives don’t, the rural that is supplied here is a rural defined in clear opposition to the urban, as the urban’s Other. Second, this urban Other is coded as upper-middle class – it is not a site of livelihood struggles or material constraints, but a site of comfort and fulfillment for already well-to-do urbanites. The coding of the rural as upper-middle class is a recurring strategy throughout the show.

After finishing the video clip, HJ asks Huang the question shown on the screen: “Are you willing to try this kind of life?” To which Huang answered “yes” without much ceremony and turns to question back to HJ. Smilingly, HJ says: “If you go, I’ll have the courage to go to,” then

to the camera, “if Mr. Huang is not there, I probably won’t be able to survive on my own.” This insinuates that the rural, despite being shown in the clip as a comfortable place for urbanites, is still a foreign realm for those accustomed to urban living, and requires a different set of skills than in the city. By making fun of himself as such, HJ is also suggesting that the rural is a realm of different but legitimate knowledge on par with the knowledge and skills needed in his urban lifestyle, and that having rural knowledge can be equally empowering. This thus salvages the rural’s backwards, “primitive” image into one that is an equal and legitimate realm of knowledge and skill in relation to the urban.

The transformative rural: social reproduction and the antidote to alienation

Each episode features a few guests, usually friends of Huang and HJ also active in the entertainment industry, that come to stay a night with the three hosts. This is arranged according to a rural bed and breakfast model, where the guests call ahead to request their meal and the hosts prepare the request as much as they can, while also coming up with some other activities – usually various farm chores – to entertain the guests. As mentioned before, this narrative arch usually starts with the guests being shocked by the material constraints and simplicity of the rural setting upon arrival, follows them through their gradual transformation from clumsy, clueless urbanites to savvy laborers, and ends with the guests expressing a deep appreciation of this kind of living before having to return to their urban homes. Within this transformation, the rural is framed as a site of alternative and transformative subjectivity. It promises the absence of alienation by having the guests focus on individual and social reproduction, and thereby promises a transformation of urban subjectivity that is touted as the cure for the kind of urban plight described in the invitation clip in the pilot episode. How does this transformation occur?

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this transformative rural occurs in episode 3.¹²⁷ The guest of episode 3 is Chen He (hereafter Chen), an actor in his 30s known for his roles in comedic dramas. Upon arrival, Chen’s resistance to rural labor and ignorance of the rural environment is painstakingly highlighted. Chen’s requested meal was the extremely time-

¹²⁷ *Back to Field*, season 1, episode 3, “Domestication of a Wild Animal”, directed by Zhengyu Wang, aired January 22, 2017, MangoTV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwvCfvcf0O0&list=PLgzewpVFOAJrzd_cg0SGrSyzl-CxQsCvI&index=4

consuming delicacy “Buddha jumps over the wall”, and the materials needed to make it plunged the three hosts deeper into debt. The hosts thus demand Chen to help harvest corn to pay off their debt, to which Chen, upon arrival, uses a series of excuses to avoid, such as a bad back and an allergy to UV rays. His serious but clearly made-up description of his UV ray allergy (“as long as there is light...and one part of me gets allergic, this will lead to my whole body becoming red and lasts for about four hours”) leaves even HJ speechless. Huang’s efforts to have Chen do other chores, such as getting fish from the pond or picking watermelons, also could not persuade him. Finally and upon repeated persuasion, Chen simply wanders aimlessly among the fields and demonstrating in the meantime how little he knows about rural chores – he mistakes sweet potato plants for watermelon, is frightened by ants, and could not tell if produce are ripe or not. He also peppers his aimless and unproductive wanders with exaggerated exclamations of how tired he is and how much labor he feels like he’s doing. In the end, a frustrated Huang tells Chen to peel mushroom membranes, which Chen further exclaims to be too difficult. His performance of a clueless urbanite is compounded by silly gestures, such as asking for electric mosquito swatter (there clearly aren’t any available) and taking selfies with the hosts who are busy at work. In the end, while all other hosts are either working in the kitchen or in the fields, Chen simply took a nap in the bedroom. Throughout Chen’s explorations in the countryside, the show supplies all kinds of humorous captions and special effects that highlight how difficult the countryside is for Chen, such as captioning him as “having a fragile body” and “just not cut out for work”. However, when Chen finally decides to go with HJ and Henry to the corn fields later on in the episode, HJ (and the audience) finds out that Chen was filming another show until 5 am that day, and came directly to this show without any rest. Shocked, HJ asks “why don’t you take a nap?” To which Chen replies: “It’s ok, I’ve already recovered [from the tiredness].” This is the only time that Chen’s condition is mentioned (by himself or anyone else) in the episode. Thus, rather than emphasizing that Chen’s resistance to rural labor, absent-mindedness in chores, and napping while everyone else is working as resulting from simply overworking and extreme lack of sleep, the show and Chen himself, who did not mention his overpacked work schedule until HJ asked, use these actions to frame a caricature of a lazy urbanite.

This caricature is needed to dramatize Chen’s transformation later on. After a short nap, Chen expresses that he might be being “cruel” by not helping with harvesting corn, and begins to

ponder out loud what kind of chores he might do to be useful. The caption “the motivation is gradually inspired” passes on screen as he says these. Then, after HJ and Henry came back with the first batch of harvested corn, Chen decides to join them for the second batch. On the way to the cornfield, and right after HJ learns that he had been working till 5 am, Chen says: “There’s a magic at the Mushroom House [the name of the rural farmhouse they’re living in]. It’ll make you join in the labor voluntarily.” With upbeat symphonic background music and special effects that make harvesting corn look like a video game, the camera shows a Chen working hard harvesting corn by hand, along with the three hosts. Captions such as “baby Chen gradually adapts to the work rhythm”, “our Chen has changed!” and “I will pay off the debt I accrued by myself” flashes across the screen. With Chen’s help, the hosts manage to break their daily record of corn harvest. After returning to the farmhouse exhausted, Chen is shown to voluntarily help out around the house. When Huang calls out that he needs a cabbage for cooking, Chen went to the field to pick one. The caption reads “a baby Chen that’s no longer lazy”, and Huang says with pleasant surprise to the film crew: “He didn’t even ask why and just went [to pick the cabbage]. He’s been domesticated!” Chen returns with a cabbage and begins washing and peeling it, and HJ and Huang make fun of him: “you’re no longer the Chen that came this morning! You can’t even stop [working] now; you’re a new Chen now!” Another more plausible explanation, namely that Chen is not inherently a lazy urbanite and was just too tired to work that morning but recovered well enough to work in the afternoon, was not explored. At dinner, as Chen and the hosts enjoy the “Buddha jumps over the wall”, a series of flashback shots to each person’s hard labor in the field are shown. Together with close-up of each person’s face that shows their enjoyment of the food (almost pornographically) and captions that celebrate their persistence and hard work, the show suggests that the food is enjoyed much better after earning it with a day of hard work. At the end of dinner, Huang says to the film crew and the audience: “This really is the life that one longs for.” And HJ elaborates: “it’s actually a very simple logic: using concrete labor to get a concrete sense of accomplishment.” The accompanying caption says: “concrete self-sufficiency (实在的自食其力)”. The transformation of Chen is thus that from a caricatured urbanite enjoying the fruits of other people’s labor, and therefore cannot fully appreciate these products, to a fulfilling and complete person who enjoys their own labor and thereby can fully appreciate the product – in other words, he turns from someone who expropriates other people’s labor and is expropriated

himself in an elaborate system of division of labor into someone who engages in his own reproduction and rejects appropriation and alienation. This absence of expropriation and alienation, framed as “self-sufficiency”, is expounded by HJ and Huang to be fundamental to a “life that one longs for”. The urban-rural contrast that Chen performs further fixes this “self-sufficiency” to a place coded as rural. Finally, the playful use of “domestication” to describe the transformation of Chen suggests that this transformation is a kind of disciplining that can happen with a change in social space from the urban to the rural – any urbanite, even one like Chen, can be disciplined by the rural and transform into a happy, self-sufficient, non-alienated subject.

A copy without an original: constructing rurality

The rurality portrayed in this show is a mostly isolated, self-sufficient agricultural community in which all lived harmoniously as kins and welcomed guests like family. This rurality draws on popular historical imaginaries of the rural, but certain points are modified with a clear gesture to the urban-centered audience market.

The “Mushroom House” community is clearly coded as a family, with Huang as the father, HJ as the mother, and Henry as the son. This familial coding is done both through humorous banter among the hosts and captions that code each person’s action. As early as the first episode, Henry asks Huang if he can be his (Huang’s) son after tasting Huang’s homemade food, and HJ and Huang playfully trains Henry to help around the house like a teenager. HJ and Henry also frequently express their dependence on Huang and implicitly affirms Huang’s position as head of the household by complimenting his food, asking him for help when they couldn’t figure out a certain task, and expressing that life in the countryside would be much harder without Huang’s skills and knowledge. HJ, on the other hand, is coded as maternal. He is shown to quietly do lots of household chores and care work, such as welcoming and making the bed for the guests. In episode 5, when HJ prepares the bed for a group of guests, the caption reads “HJ being *xianhui* (贤惠) at the front line”.¹²⁸ *Xianhui* doesn’t have a clear English translation but is a term referring to a household-oriented, sacrificing and soft-tempered wife-

¹²⁸ *Back to Field*, season 1, episode 5, “Classmates”, directed by Zhengyu Wang, aired February 12, 2017, MangoTV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpXWdroimFA&list=PLgzwepVFOAJrzd_cg0SGrSyzl-CxQsCvI&index=6

mother figure. In the same scene, one of the guests comes in to help HJ and asks if he is married. When HJ replies he is not, the guest humorously responds: “how is someone this kind not married out yet?” The use of “married out” (嫁) is also reserved to describe females marrying. Finally, as mentioned before, HJ’s ambiguous sexuality also functions as an intertextual reference that subtly codes him to the audience as a feminine figure. Henry, much younger than Huang and HJ, is frequently shown to be naughty and playful, often requiring some disciplining from Huang or encouragement from HJ. On a daily level, the three hosts are shown to engage in clear and harmonious divisions of labor. In episode 3, for instance, while the three hosts are doing different household chores in the courtyard (Huang starting a fire, HJ sawing wood, and Henry washing dishes), Huang sighs: “this is so harmonious!” When Chen got up and entered the courtyard the caption reads “Chen is attracted by the cozy and homely atmosphere”. The family-centered portrayal of rural social relations is therefore unmistakable.

The production team also went to great length to make Mushroom House seem like an isolated and self-sufficient community. When choosing the filming site, the directors looked for sites that fulfilled the criteria of “having an independent courtyard, located in the mountains, and only has a narrow mountain road leading to it”¹²⁹. In the end, the chosen Mushroom House was a large courtyard-style farmhouse adjacent to, but not in walking distance to, the nearest small town, and the hosts very rarely leave the courtyard. On the few occasions that they had to drive to the town to purchase necessities, they are often shown to be exhilarated and saying things like “we’re finally going into the city!” To deal with the obvious fact that farm families participate in the external agricultural market in order to obtain necessities, the production team did as much as they can to shelter Mushroom House. They established an isolated and artificial market exchange, where instead of the elaborate agricultural commodity chain and market, the production team is the only source of raw materials and pricing decisions. The small cash allowances to the hosts that are used to purchase necessities from the town are also allocated to them directly by the production team, rather than earned from agricultural produce sales. Very few local rural residents are shown in the show, and those that are shown (e.g. a neighbor whose

¹²⁹ Jingzhe Xu, “A Slow Variety Show Touches the Heart of Urbanites,” *Beijing Daily*, January 26, 2017, <http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0126/c40606-29049926.html>

small truck they often borrow) merely functions as mostly silent icons – their conversations with the hosts are edited so that the audience mostly see only the hosts talking, and the rural residents’ responses are summarized with captions. Despite these clear artifices of sheltering and isolation involved, the Mushroom House is heavily styled as an inherently “self-sufficient” place – the hosts, guests, and the captions all refer to living there as “self-sufficient”.

Isolation, self-sufficiency, harmonious kinship – these are not gratuitously selected characteristics but a structured historical-literary reference that most educated audience will know from one of the most widely taught and circulated pieces of literature on Chinese rurality, the *Taohuayuan Ji* (桃花源记) or “The Tale of the Peach Blossom Spring” by Jin dynasty poet Tao Yuanming. The *taohuayuan* or *taoyuan*, literally meaning “peach blossom source/spring”, is a utopian rural community made up by the author that has become an established metaphor in contemporary China. *Taohuayuan Ji* tells of a fisherman during the Jin dynasty who stumbles accidentally into a peach blossom forest leading into a mountain valley. He discovers here a community that escaped into the secluded mountain valley during wartime, and continued to live in the valley for generations without any knowledge and communication of the outside world. The physical appearance of *taohuayuan* is as follows (translation mine):

The land is flat and wide, and the houses are neatly aligned. There are fertile soil, beautiful ponds, and various lush vegetation. Small roads intersect plots of field, and villages can hear each other’s chickens and dogs. Among these are people who are ploughing and working the field. Both men and women’s attire are like those from the outside. Small children and the elderly are all happy and content.¹³⁰

Upon seeing the fisherman, the community members invite him to their houses. They treat him with a feast, and converse and lament with him about the turbulent outside world. After staying for a few days, the fisherman leaves the community for home. Although the *taohuayuan* locals ask him not to mention this place to anyone else, the fisherman immediately tells his local official about it after coming out. However, no one has managed to find the place ever again.

¹³⁰ Yuanming Tao, “The Tale of the Peach Blossom Spring”, 422 CE.

Back to Field explicitly references *Taoyuan* as early as the pilot episode. When introducing the Mushroom House, the camera takes a bird-eye view of the courtyard nestled in green mountains, showing the distance from town and the plots of fields surrounding the courtyard, and the caption reads: “a small village lying quietly at the foot of the Wuling mountain, and a *taohuayuan* far from the madding crowd”. Guests also often exclaim upon arriving that Mushroom House is like a *taoyuan*. Thus, the rurality assembled in the show is based on a widely recognized historical-literary metaphor of utopian isolation, self-sufficiency, and harmonious community – from the production teams’ effort to present an isolated farm courtyard to the familial coding among the hosts. Furthermore, the narrative arch of the show also closely resembles that of *Taoyuan*, with the hosts demonstrating their hospitality by preparing elaborate meals and conversing with the guests about their lives. Most of the conversations they have at dinner time are nostalgic in nature – the hosts often lament with the guests about the loss of youth and the good memories they have shared before, much like how the fisherman lamented with *Taoyuan* locals about the turbulent world of wars and dynastic changes, and the loss of a golden age of stability and contentment.

However, upon closer examination, the show’s *Taoyuan* is an uncanny simulation of a rural utopia from an urban perspective. This is closely related to the strategy of coding the rural as upper-middle class mentioned before, but goes one step further to instill urban logic into a rural form. One obvious urban substitution is that the household of the Mushroom House is not one with “elders and children” but an idealized, single-child nuclear family. A more apparent site of urban logic, however, is the relationship between humans and animals in the show. Adhering to the original description of *Taoyuan* as a place where “chickens and dogs” can be heard, the production team set up Mushroom House with a puppy and gave the hosts three chickens. Two sheep were also sent to the hosts later. Yet none of these animals have a productive or utilitarian relationship with the hosts’ farm household; instead, they were considered pets or family members, following a urban middle-class logic where animals function as affective machines. This tension – between a rural form in which animals are supposed to be productive and an urban logic in which household animals are pets – is the source of much humor in the show. When the three chickens arrived in the farm, one of the chicken flies off and wanders the woods without laying eggs at home. In episode 2, therefore, Huang considers out loud whether they should

slaughter and eat the unproductive chicken, to which HJ makes an expression of amused horror: “but Little White (the name given to the chicken) is a family member!” When the production team sends the hosts two sheep, Huang further exclaims: “This sheep – you can’t even drink its milk. What is it even here for?” and follows up with, “my favorite meat is lamb!”¹³¹ In episode 5, Huang laughingly talks to the filming camera: “that sheep now exists only as a pet...if we do eat the sheep though, you guys [referring to the production team] will not agree with it!” HJ also laughs beside him, and here are inserted a series of clips in which Huang expresses a desire to eat the sheep or the chickens, with humorous background music playing. HJ and Huang’s laugh, furthermore, suggests that the very idea of eating the sheep is absurd and comedic. Even more telling is that after season 1 finished filming, the director drove the animals presented in the show to another farm in Hangzhou (where the production company is based) to reside, and set the animals up again for the rural farmhouse used to film season 2.¹³² The same animals are also used in all later seasons. Regarding the transportation and filming of these animals, the director commented that: “they [the animals] are family. Even if there are temporary absences...all family members need to be together.” Some of the more heavily featured animals, such as the dog, have weibo accounts opened on their behalf, on which their clips are shown to fans. Hence, the rurality depicted in the show is actually a copy without an original – a simulation of the rural by urbanites to appeal to, stimulate recognition in, but not alienate, other urbanites.

Conclusion: Commodity and Space

In what sense is the rural portrayed in *Back to Field SI* a commodity? In the first and most obvious sense, *Back to Field* is a media commodity produced to be viewed by audience and profited from, and the rural is the place in which this commodity is produced. However, there is a second sense in which the rural that is portrayed on screen is itself a commodity, which is produced from but does not have a linear relationship with material rural place. This image or simulacrum of the rural is what I emphasize with “rural-as-commodity”.

¹³¹ *Back to Field*, season 1, episode 2, “It’s Good to be Young”, directed by Zhengyu Wang, aired January 22, 2017, MangoTV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjNLREZxMjs&list=PLgzewpVFOAJrzd_cg0SGrSyzl-CxQsCvI&index=3

¹³² Xiuyue Yuan, “Plough the Fields for Half a Year for a Show? Why the director of *Back to Field* Would Do It,” *China News*, July 1, 2018, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/yl/2018/07-01/8552547.shtml>

It's useful to revisit Marx's definition of commodity here. Commodity is something produced by human labor, has both a use-value and an exchange value, and is exchanged in a market. Use-value is necessary both because the commodity needs to be useful to someone in order for exchange to happen and because exchange value – congealed abstract labor – needs a material form to “wear” it. However, not all use-values are commodities, and Marx had this to say:

He who satisfies his own need with the product of his own labour admittedly creates use-values, but not commodities. In order to produce the latter, he must not only produce use-values, but use-values for others, social use-values.¹³³

Use-value, despite being tied to the physical properties of the commodity, is actually socially produced. Put differently, the desire for certain things and the market in which these things circulate are socially produced. *Back to Field SI* supplies us with an image of self-sufficiency, where the hosts and guests supposedly produced their own use-value to be consumed. However, this act of consuming the use-value that they produced becomes a *use-value for others* through filming, cinematic editing, and circulation on an established media market. Thus, arising out of this market of media commodities is a new market, or a structure of desire, for a particular kind of rurality. The hosts and guests' exaggerated demonstration of rural tranquility and sensual pleasure makes the cinematic rural a use-value as it attempts to stimulate desire among its audience, and thereby opens up space for this simulation of the rural to be exchanged, not only as media artifacts but also as physical places, as more and more rural areas offer simulations of themselves to urban tourists. The audience are encouraged to feel that they *need* this particular rurality portrayed in the show to cure their own urban plight. More than just a way to circulate media commodities, therefore, the rural simulacrum in *Back to Field SI* also makes an ontological statement of what the rural is – a commodity for urban consumption on and off screen. This makes possible the tourism-led strategy described in chapter two.

It is also because of this commodification of rurality that a simultaneous homogenization and heterogenization of rural place occurs. By making the rural recognizable as a commodity, the

¹³³ Marx, *Capital*, 131.

rural-as-commodity strategy means that it matters less where the rural place is as long as it's coded in a way that conforms to urban expectations. In *Back to Field SI*, there is very little reference to where the filming site is – the Mushroom House's isolated environment seems like it could be in any rural place. The specific use-value of the rural cultivated in the show, similarly, is not place-specific; the middle-class, transformative rural subjectivity could be achieved anywhere that is coded rural. At the same time, however, the rural-as-commodity does not exist in a vacuum – although it is produced from media simulation, its surplus value cannot be fully realized unless its connection to the physical rural is cemented. In other words, the rural-as-commodity is emerging in a context described extensively in chapter two, where real rural places are competing with each other and endeavoring to attract tourists. The rural-as-commodity, therefore, functions in three ways: as a media commodity to be consumed, as a production of rural use-value to stimulate urban tourists, and as a template that rural development stakeholders can consult. As chapter 2 already makes clear, townships and villages need to differentiate themselves in order to be competitive in the tourism industry. In conjunction with this chapter, we can see that rural development through commodification operates through both homogenization and heterogenization – the rural is increasingly coded, and perform themselves, in ways that conform to a recognizable rural-as-commodity, while simultaneously differentiating themselves as spatially distinct rural commodities to attract capital inflow. The double commodification of the countryside thus embodies, and is characterized by, this dialectic of space.

CHAPTER IV:

CONCLUSION:

CAPITALISM, SPACE, AND THE CASE OF CHINA

This thesis has argued that urban-rural relations in China have been shifting in recent decades towards a double commodification of the countryside, and new divisions and integrations of labor have been emerging – such as those between landscape of production and consumption and between urban production/consumption and rural reproduction. I will conclude by briefly contemplating how this development features in the general development of capitalism and take up the question of “Chinese” capitalism. Although this manifestation of rural development is not an unprecedented theoretical novelty or an empirically unique innovation from China, it does reveal important mechanisms of capitalist and Chinese development that received inadequate attention thus far.

In relation to capitalist development, this thesis has shown how transitions in the regime of production are necessarily accompanied by and facilitate transitions in the regime of reproduction, and it is only when production and reproduction are made to cohere that accumulation can continue. This dynamic has received many names in prior debates of capitalism – for instance, as the dynamic between base and superstructure, regime of accumulation and mode of regulation, or simply the ways in which contradictions are displaced into new social and material formations. I frame the transformation of rurality in China in terms of social reproduction in order to emphasize two things: the intentionality of this transformation directed at further facilitating production (hence *re*-production), and the insights from social reproduction feminists that there is significant labor expended in the production of life (whether biological, spiritual, or collective/communal) in order to sustain the production of surplus value (hence *re-production*). Here I am also following Raymond Williams’ corrective in the base-superstructure debate that both “base” and “superstructure” are materially produced, and interact dialectically with each other. By drawing attention to the tremendous expenditure of capital and labor in reconstructing and re-representing the countryside, I show how accumulation proceeds through both regimes of production and reproduction.

My contribution to discussions on China's development also lies in the emphasis on the symbiosis of production and reproduction. Instead of focusing on the dynamics of local political economy development and considering cultural production as only an accompaniment or afterthought, I emphasize the potential of works such as Yan Hairong's in demonstrating how distinct ways of "Chinese" local development are intimately intertwined with the specificity of social reproduction in China. This avoids methodological nationalism by rejecting any essentialist notion of "Chinese capitalism", and instead draws attention to how patterns of capitalist development are concretized in the Chinese context. In other words, I show how capitalist logic seeps into specific institutions and formations and become symbiotic with them, disrupting in the process any fixed notion of capitalism or China.

For instance, China's case demonstrates that capitalism is much more complicated than "neoliberalism" in the Euro-American context. Capitalism can be twisted to cohere with objectives beyond surplus accumulation in its process of infecting different social formations. Dragon-head enterprises like Zaobaijian, for example, are created from the convergence of state and private capital and interpolated into a position of welfare provision *via* accumulation, through procurement of tea and later hiring of local farmers, and provisions of raw materials and training. The presence of state objectives, however, does not make these developments any less capitalist, and this is in fact a general condition facing financially drained local governments in China: their successful provision of public goods *hinges upon* their success of capital accumulation. On the other hand, when we examine the landscape of cultural production in China, the intense struggle of private capital under the objectives of state propaganda is a characteristic feature, and has produced many media and literary artifacts that jump back and forth – whether successfully or not – between the two. Reading these different interactions between state and capital in local development and in cultural production together, this thesis has shown that the distinctness of China's capitalist development lies precisely in these variegated mediations of capital by the state, which contribute to forming China-specific regimes of production and reproduction.

Finally, this thesis also shows how the production of space and place constitute a core feature of Chinese development. This does not only mean, as scholars of urbanization in China have extensively documented, the production of new physical space. I am also referring to the

production of abstract place coded as “rural”, and how this interacts dialectically with the concrete production of heterogenous rural place. I am further referring to how spatial division of labor is integral to the relationship between regimes of production and reproduction. Indeed, it is through remapping the spatial division of labor between country and the city that China has attempted to develop an emergent regime of reproduction that facilitates its current regime of production.

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