The Bishan Project: Cultural Production and Place Reconstruction in Rural China

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Collaborative Masters of Arts Program in Asia-Pacific Studies
Graduate Department of East Asian Studies
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ABSTRACT

In 2011, curators and cultural workers Ou Ning and Zuo Jing founded the Bishan Project, an effort to address rural-urban inequality in contemporary China through artistic and cultural production, based in Bishan Village of Yi County, Anhui Province. This study will examine how the Bishan Project endeavors to reconstruct rural places in response to the decline of rural communities generated by China’s marketization and integration with the global economy. Focusing on the material, re-presentational, and symbolic activities that contribute to place construction in Bishan and Yi County, I will reveal how the project attempts to make the rural visible while reconstructing Bishan to symbolize a utopian alternative to the social and spatial realities of China’s countryside.
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INTRODUCTION

As Chinese cities continue to expand under a state-supported model of economic growth through urbanization, scholars and intellectuals have turned their attention to the implications of this process for China’s countryside. Artist, curator and cultural activist Ou Ning 欧宁 (1969-) is a critical voice in the discussion of China’s trajectory of development with its emphasis on industrial capital, economic globalization and urbanization. He believes that this development has led to the economic and cultural decay of rural communities and an increasingly problematic relationship between urban and rural areas. In 2011, Ou and his colleague, curator Zuo Jing 左靖 (1980-) founded the Bishan Project in Anhui province’s Yi County, with Ou and his family moving to Bishan Village shortly after. Using art and culture as its entry point, and inspired by utopian ideals, the Bishan Project endeavors to challenge the social and cultural dominance of urban areas and offer a more constructive model for rural-urban relations.

Yi County is part of Huizhou, a historical region that today encompasses southern Anhui along with one county in Jiangxi Province (Li Yuanxing, 193). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, villages in the region flourished, supported by the incomes of returning merchants (Du Yongtao 411). Traditional Hui culture is characterized by an emphasis on Confucian learning and clan lineage, and a unique architectural style, preserved particularly well in Xidi and Hongcun, two of Bishan’s neighbouring villages and UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Li Yuanxing, 195). While Bishan’s historical buildings are not as grand or as well preserved as those in Xidi and Hongcun, the village contains many houses and ancestral halls that epitomize the region’s vernacular architecture. Ou Ning notes that Bishan’s local customs, natural resources, and historical capital were all factors in his decision to base his project in the village (presentation). Ou Ning and Zuo Jing were also inspired by the efforts of their friend, poet Han Yu 寒玉, who purchased and restored two old buildings in Bishan, turning them into guesthouses.
In 2010, Ou Ning bought his own house in Bishan and, together with Zuo Jing, proceeded to found the Bishan Commune in 2011 (O’Dea).

Ou maintains that the project is part of the Rural Reconstruction Movement (hereafter RRM) developed in the twentieth-century, which has its roots in a few Republican-era movements led by intellectuals such as Y.C. James Yen or Yan Yangchu 晏阳初 (1890-1990) and Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893-1988) among others. At the same time, the Bishan project resonates with contemporary discussions on globalization and draws inspiration from other rural movements around the world, including communal living experiments in Western countries and rural projects in Asia that “explore alternative art systems and culture-based strategies” to revitalize agricultural regions (Ou, “Bishan Project”). While political and economic concerns have played an important role in the ideological foundation of the Bishan Project, its approach to rural reconstruction is based primarily on artistic and cultural production:

Adopting the intellectual resources of China's traditional agricultural industry and rural philosophies, as well as Leftist or even Anarchist ideas, Bishan aims to combat the encroachments of globalization and neoliberalism, and by using art and culture as our first point of entry, we ultimately hope to influence politics and economics with our work in rural areas. (Ou, “Bishan Project”)

Ou states that the decision to use artistic production as the “first point of entry” for their reconstruction efforts was based partially on his and his colleagues’ own backgrounds as artists and curators (“Bishan Project”). He also notes that a significant portion of the funding for the Bishan Project comes from his work as a curator for art events (“Bishan Project”). Along with the broad range of philosophies, ideologies and practices that have inspired Ou in his research on rural issues, Ou Ning and Zuo Jing’s professional experience has also had an important influence on the development of the Bishan Project.
In this thesis I aim to examine the spatial politics of the Bishan Project, particularly how Ou and Zuo’s efforts engage with the concept of place construction. During my interviews and discussions with Ou Ning, I was struck by how his concern with the countryside is primarily spatial and geographic, and how his attempts to address those concerns take shape in his initiative to reconstruct Bishan as a place. Ou Ning’s sensitivity to geospatial production of urban and rural relations differentiates him from those former RRM leaders who wanted to modernize the rural population through education. More importantly, it resonates with geographers and critics of late capitalism such as Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey. Henri Lefebvre’s claim that “(social) space is a (social) product” prompts us to consider how space is defined and produced as a means of control, particularly in a Marxist conception of control over the relations of production. In his essay “From Space to Place and Back Again,” David Harvey draws on Lefebvre to argue that places can also be socially (re)constructed in resistance to the forces of global capital that often seek to appropriate or annihilate them (24). I believe Lefebvre and Harvey provide a productive critical framework that can better contextualize the Bishan Project, its goals and its potential significance to contemporary China and the world.

I intend to proceed by first expanding on the critical and theoretical background of the Bishan Project, including its connection to China’s past and present Rural Reconstruction Movements. I will also offer an account of the spatial nature of the project and how it relates to David Harvey’s notion of place construction. I then intend to analyze the different activities encompassed in the Bishan Project that contribute to place construction. My final section will address some of the challenges and criticisms faced by the project in the context of Ou and Zuo’s desire to address the cultural dimension of rural-urban inequality.
SECTION I: THE BISHAN PROJECT AND THE RRM

When discussing why he became interested in China’s countryside, Ou Ning points out that many individuals have attempted to address rural issues over the past hundred years of China’s history (personal interview). As Ou learned more about the problems faced by rural communities, he began to look at the history of China’s Rural Reconstruction Movements (RRM). In his essay “Rural Reconstruction in China,” Ou traces the history of rural reconstruction from Mi Digang and his father Mi Jianshan’s “village government” movement in the late Qing dynasty to Wen Tiejun’s revival of the RRM in the early 2000s. As Ou points out, the historical rural reconstruction movement reached its peak in the late Republican era, when a number of Chinese reformers turned to China’s rural communities to promote mass education and facilitate social, cultural and political development. Among these projects, the best known experiments were led by Liang Shuming in Zouping county, Shandong Province, and James Yen in Ding County, Hebei Province. The work of these Republican-era intellectuals has been an important source of inspiration for Ou, and he asserts that the Bishan Project is part of the legacy of the Republican-era RRM (“Rural Reconstruction in China”).

In September 2012, Shenzhen Yuezhong Film Company released a documentary about James Yen as part of the company’s historical series Xiansheng (“teacher” or “gentleman” in English), prominently featuring Ou Ning as a cultural activist carrying Yen’s legacy forward. As Ou Ning recounts in the documentary’s opening interview, “I first started studying Yan Yangchu in 2005, and slowly my thoughts on countryside, as well as my urge to do something for the countryside, became stronger” (Yan Yangchu: dao minjian qu). Ou Ning notes that his work in Bishan has been influenced by the activist aspects of the Republican-era RRM projects, particularly the notion that farmers and rural residents are the primary concern of the countryside, and that reconstruction efforts should help rural people improve their villages (personal interview). While
Ou Ning has been inspired by the work of reformers such as Yen and Liang, I argue that the Bishan Project represents a departure from the objectives of the Republican-era RRM. Both Liang Shuming and James Yen’s Republican-era reconstruction experiments were organized largely around educational initiatives. Liang Shuming’s project, influenced by Confucian philosophy, endeavored to integrate local government with educational institutions, and promote peasants’ “‘upward improvement through education’” (quoted by Wu and Tong, 45). James Yen, through mass literacy initiatives based in China’s villages, aimed to “eliminate illiteracy and make new citizens,” as his slogan declares (Yen, 162). The goals expressed by Liang and Yen suggest that they saw their rural reconstruction activities as enlightenment projects that would mould China’s peasants into modern citizens. In contrast, both the conceptual framework and implementation of the Bishan project suggest that Ou Ning is not motivated by a desire to “enlighten” Bishan’s residents but by the urge to challenge how urban and rural space is produced and conceived of in contemporary China. Ou’s essays and comments reveal that he is particularly troubled by the hierarchy that places urban areas in a position of economic, social and cultural dominance. In this section, I intend to analyze the spatial nature of the concerns Ou Ning hopes to address through the Bishan Project.

In the early 2000s, scholars and activists began to call for a new approach to China’s rural crisis, evidenced by the surge of rural unrest in the 1990s (Day, “The End of the Peasant?” 50). As Alexander Day explains, these intellectuals argued that the state’s focus on rural economy and agricultural production did not adequately address the historical and social conditions of China’s rural crisis, and that a new approach must aim to “reconstruct the social, economic and cultural relations of rural society” (“The End of the Peasant?” 51). Day notes that the economist Wen Tiejun was a key figure in this movement, which derived its name and some of its inspiration from the Rural Reconstruction Movement of the 1920s and 30s (“The End of the
Wen Tiejun believes that is necessary to “deconstruct” the conventional model of modernization that emphasizes urbanization and increasing national income (“Deconstructing Modernization” 10). Wen argues that this type of modernization alone does little to address and may actually exacerbate disparity, particularly between urban and rural areas (“Deconstructing Modernization”17). Instead, Wen advocates construction movements that address rural problems through development initiatives based on traditional knowledge and local organization (Wen, Lau, Cheng, He and Qiu, 34).

Much of the research on the new rural reconstruction movement has been dedicated to assessing how rural initiatives can effectively address social and economic inequities in China’s countryside. Pan Jia’en and Du Jie echo some of the same sentiments expressed by Wen Tiejun, advocating a form of “social economy” that does not simply “serve the accumulation of capital” (271). They argue that rural reconstruction projects such as farming co-operatives must “re-embed” economic aims into the social contexts of rural communities (271). The authors point to the Beijing-based Community Supported Agriculture initiative Little Donkey Farm as an example of how a commercial endeavor can promote economic development along with the values of sustainability and social justice (280). Yan Hairong and Chen Yiyuan examine the debates over rural cooperatives, claiming that, like the Republican-era movement, the new RRM struggles with a lack of equal participation among farmers and a reliance on political support for projects to succeed (976). Alexander Day surveys the contemporary discussion of rural self-governance, which, for left-leaning thinkers, has the potential to extend beyond the political sphere to include cultural and economic platforms for organization (“A Century” 950). Both Day’s and Yan and Chen’s papers suggest that the RRM may be limited by the tendency of advocates to view peasants as a homogenized group, without accounting for class differences (Day, “A Century” 950; Yan and Chen 973). Tamara Jacka offers a feminist critique of the new
RRM, arguing that scholars tend to neglect issues related to gender in rural society (984). Without acknowledging the gendered nature of the inequality produced by social institutions in rural China, the RRM will be unable to address economic and cultural injustice (984). These discussions reveal the complexity of China’s rural problems and the numerous debates on the movements that aim to address them.

While these scholars offer valuable perspectives on different rural reconstruction initiatives, in considering how their approaches relate to the Bishan Project I have encountered questions that are beyond the scope of their analyses. These studies of China’s current Rural Reconstruction Movement are primarily concerned with the effectiveness of various endeavors to address inequity in rural areas. While the rural reconstruction efforts they discuss are primarily economic and political initiatives, the Bishan project uses artistic and cultural production as its entry point. If the Bishan Project is not structured to produce immediate political or economic results, what is the role of artistic and cultural production in articulating concerns over the political and economic conditions that have shaped rural areas? I argue that the Bishan Project operates as a critique of the way urban and rural space is produced by the narrative of “modernization” that Wen Tiejun criticizes in his analysis. Like Wen Tiejun, Ou Ning believes that the emphasis on development through capital accumulation has led to severe consequences for China’s rural areas (“Bishan Project”). For Ou Ning, these consequences are manifested in the material realities of rural areas as well as the conception of rural places as socially or culturally backward (“Bishan Project”). How then might the Bishan Project endeavor to confront with the hegemonic construction of countryside and potentially change how rural places are perceived in contemporary China? These questions have prompted me to seek an approach that relates to notions of space and place, which I will expand on in this section and the one that follows.
Many of Ou Ning’s essays, interviews, and presentations reflect his concern over China’s urban-focused development and its implications for both cities and rural areas. In a panel at the 2013 Co-China forum, Ou discusses how his work on the 2003 documentary *San Yuan Li* stimulated his interest in rural-urban relations. The film portrays a once-rural village that was enveloped by the urban sprawl of Guangzhou. For Ou Ning, these “urban villages” (cheng zhong cun) are one of the problematic consequences of China’s rapid urbanization. As Ou elaborates, farmland on the outskirts of cities such as Guangzhou was expropriated for urban development, leaving behind villages that were eventually surrounded by urban construction (“After the ‘Failure’”). As the government failed to provide the residents of these villages with alternative job opportunities or urban household registration (hukou), villagers would instead build housing on their allocated residential land to rent out, often to the city’s floating population (“After the ‘Failure’”). Ou points out that the lack of administrative oversight in the development of these areas has led to poor conditions and security concerns, to the extent that the government has labeled the “urban village phenomenon” a “malignant tumor” (“After the ‘Failure’”). Ou Ning notes that the annexation of farmland and reallocation of natural and human resources often leads to social unrest (“After the ‘Failure’”). Ou’s comments suggest that the process of China’s urban development has involved an aggressive appropriation of rural space with little regard for rural populations and their land. Wen Tiejun also makes note of this issue, claiming that, even if the proportion of China’s population living in urban areas increases according to government objectives, the rate at which rural land is acquired for urban development will mean that “people-land relations” are likely to worsen (“Deconstructing Modernization” 21).

There is a clear congruity between Ou Ning’s critique of urban-focused development and Wen Tiejun’s resistance to the state policy of modernization through capital accumulation. Ou Ning’s arguments echo Wen’s claims that China’s urbanization has resulted from the state’s
agenda to put large cities at the forefront of the country’s economic development, frequently at the expense of villages and the countryside (Ou “After the ‘Failure’”; Wen “Ecological Civilization” 1). Wen Tiejun elaborates on this below:

Under the pressure to accumulate sufficient capital to begin a major self-propelling forward push (what Marx called the primitive accumulation of capital), and to participate in global competition, national capital commodified the natural and human resources on which people’s livelihood depended, taking land, labor, and money out of villages while leaving aged men and women with children at home. This historical process not only destroys nature and family, but also homogenizes diversified rural indigenous traditional knowledge. (“Ecological Civilization” 2)

According to Wen, the process of capital accumulation has resulted not only in the withdrawal of natural and human resources from rural areas, but also in the loss of local knowledge. Through his research on China’s urban issues, Ou Ning became increasingly aware of the relationship between urban problems and the decline of China’s rural communities. He summarizes this connection in his discussion at the Co-China forum:

Therefore urbanization, especially excessive urbanization, has very serious consequences. The continued annexation of agricultural land has bankrupted agriculture, peasants have no means of making a living and have no choice but to go to cities and find jobs as migrant workers. After arriving in cities, the barriers of the household registration system make it impossible for them to benefit from the city’s public resources. As their salaries are low, they can only congregate in low-cost high-density residences, forming slums and urban villages, which create many social problems. (“After the ‘Failure’”)

Urban and rural issues are thus both connected to the process of urbanization that has led to an increasingly divided geography between cities and rural areas. Moreover, this spatial division
between the urban and the rural is deepened by China’s integration with the global economy. As Ou Ning points out, while many cities in the US and Europe are shrinking, cities in Asia are expanding as European and North American companies move their bases of production to Asia’s urban centers: “So regions in Asia, particularly in China, depend on cheaply-priced labor for the initial accumulation of capital, eventually becoming a powerful economic structure. These kinds of economic activities happen primarily in cities, as cities are concentrated centers of resources and job opportunities” (“After the ‘Failure’”). Ou’s assessment of rural-urban relations is therefore particularly critical of the uneven geographic distribution of global capital and labor, which has created inequality between urban and rural areas on an unprecedented scale.

The reproduction of rural-urban disparity in the global context outlined by Ou Ning parallels Lefebvre’s observations on the social production of space. According to Lefebvre, the production of space is connected to the “social relations of production” that constitute capitalism. Here Lefebvre’s notion of capitalism extends beyond the system of relations between the state, financial institutions, and private actors to encompass the “exercise of hegemony” over space (10). He maintains that capitalism has produced an “abstract space,” which encompasses “the ‘world of commodities’, its ‘logic’ and its worldwide strategies, as well as the power of money and that of the political state” (53). This abstract space is “founded on the vast network of banks, business centers and major productive entities, as also on motorways, airports and information lattices” (53). Lefebvre maintains that abstract space works to “erase distinctions” and appropriate marginal spaces: “The dominant form of space, that of the centers of wealth and power, endeavors to mould the spaces it dominates (i.e. peripheral spaces), and it seeks, often by violent means to reduce the obstacles and resistances it encounters there” (49). The relentless encroachment of urban development on the village in San Yuan Li is an example of this oppressive potential. China’s current urban-rural relationship can thus be imagined as a process
that reproduces urban space as the dominant center and leads to the continued marginalization of rural areas.

David Harvey’s work builds on the notion of capitalism’s hegemony over space. Harvey’s conception of “uneven geographical development” is characterized by the creation of geographical difference by “political-economic and socio-ecological processes” (*Spaces of Hope* 78). He cites geographical disparities in capital investment as one example of a process that tends to exacerbate regional inequalities (*Spaces of Hope* 78). Harvey also believes that the notion of geographical uneven development offers a framework through which we can better understand the inconsistent nature of globalization (*Spaces of Hope* 81). He expands on this relationship below:

Globalization entails, for example, a great deal of self-destruction, devaluation and bankruptcy at different scales and in different locations. It renders whole populations selectively vulnerable to the violence of down-sizing, unemployment, collapse of services, degradation in living standards, and loss of resources and environmental qualities. It puts existing political and legal institutions as well as whole cultural configurations and ways of life at risk and it does so at a variety of spatial scales. It does all this at the same time as it concentrates wealth and power and further political-economic opportunities in a few selective locations and within a few restricted strata of the population. (*Spaces of Hope* 81)

How individuals and groups experience globalization is thus contingent in part on their geographic circumstances. While this inequality is evident on a global scale, it operates on national and regional scales as well. China’s *hukou* system exacerbates this geographical disparity, as rural residents who migrate to China’s cities (often to work in factories manufacturing products for export) are unable to access the basic public services offered those
with urban *hukou* (Chan and Zhang 847). The link between globalization and different scales of geographical inequality is an important concern for Ou Ning as he considers how global processes and national policy have shaped China’s villages.

While Ou is undoubtedly concerned with the social consequences of China’s urbanization, he also expresses anxiety over worsening environmental conditions and the future of agriculture in China. Ou argues that urbanization in China has come at a huge cost to the environment, pointing to the numerous environmental protests that have recently erupted in cities (“After the ‘Failure’”). Food security is another important factor in Ou’s critique of urbanization and the decline of agriculture. Ou Ning cites an Associated Press report that claims China will become the world’s largest importer of agricultural goods in ten years (“After the ‘Failure’”). He believes that an over-reliance on agricultural imports in a globalized economy makes China considerably more vulnerable to global financial crises. While China’s Premier Li Keqiang has also expressed concern over food security, he claims that it can be achieved through the scientific and technological advancement of agriculture (“Promoting Coordinated Urbanization”). Ou, however, calls for a return to traditional agricultural practices. He argues that traditional societies in China were inherently self-sufficient, with systems for storing surplus grain to either be distributed to people in need or saved for consumption in the event of disasters (“After the ‘Failure’”). In addition, Ou maintains that rural communities used their large populations to their advantage for increasing agricultural productivity, engaging in intensive farming, multiple cropping, and combining labor power (“After the ‘Failure’”). Ou’s plea for the revival of traditional agricultural practices reveals another aspect of his resistance to the state-prescribed program of modernization.

In his essay “Bishan Project: Restarting the Rural Reconstruction Movement,” Ou summarizes the initial motives for the Bishan project: “We started out from wanting to address
those imbalances between cities and the countryside that have manifested grim realities such as the deterioration of agricultural industries, rural villages, and farm laborer empowerment, and are the direct result of excessive urbanization.” While the project aims to address the material consequences of urbanization for China’s villages, a number of Ou’s comments suggest that he also hopes to change the social and cultural values that inform people’s perception of the countryside. Ou is eager to challenge the conventional dichotomy of the culturally backward or stagnant village and the progressive, innovative city. As he remarks in Leah Thompson and Sun Yunfan’s documentary, “In China, the ideology of urbanization is too dominant. Everyone believes a successful life can only happen in the city” (Down to the Countryside). For Ou, popular conceptions of the countryside can have a particularly damaging effect on rural residents: “Rural citizens are greatly influenced by modern mainstream values, while their wisdom and power are constantly belittled, eroding their confidence in their rural ways of life and erasing their subjectivity in wider society” (Ou, The Interactions 59). In a private interview Ou offers an example of this phenomenon when he discusses why villagers often prefer contemporary urban-style dwellings to their traditional Hui-style houses. As Ou claims, “Contemporary rural aesthetics have been completely transformed by urban aesthetics.” For Ou, the rural-urban dichotomy in contemporary China cannot simply be reduced to economic inequality; it is also evidenced by the cultural values that favor urban life.

The Bishan Project’s emphasis on cultural production highlights Ou’s desire to address the cultural hierarchy of urban and rural areas. In a private interview, Ou mentions that artistic production in cities has already become oversaturated, while rural areas are still a “blank space.” The term “blank space” suggests a perceived dichotomy between the urban as the site of cultural production and innovation and the rural as abandoned, backward, or culturally void. Ou
expresses a desire to subvert the cultural and visual production of the urban-rural divide caused by the uneven distribution of global capital:

Art production has been relegated to the assembly-line to meet the needs of supply and demand, while the power of creativity and social critique are further diluted on a daily basis. Art production and circulation are concentrated in urban areas associated with economic development and high population densities, leading to production values that by no means favor border regions or rural areas and ultimately the injustice of regional imbalance. Cities possess a surfeit of cultural resources and opportunities while cultural famine ravages border regions and rural areas, which is a pattern duplicated on a macro scale by the globalized political economy (“Bishan Project”).

Artistic production in cities has thus been subsumed under the relations of production that continue to reproduce the dichotomy of the urban “center” and the rural “periphery”. Aiming to transform the image of the countryside from the abandoned “blank space” into a space of artistic production, the Bishan Project also offers a chance to rescue art from the process of capital accumulation that has come to define its production in cities.

For Ou Ning, rural-urban relations in contemporary China are characterized by immense social, economic and cultural disparities. He notes that the failure to address these problems could have devastating consequences for China’s stability (personal interview). As an intellectual and cultural critic, Ou feels it is his duty to engage with the rural urban divide newly re-shaped by marketization and globalization. While Ou’s critique is founded on the contemporary political and economic practices that shape rural-urban relations, he also exhibits an intellectual alliance with different sources from a variety of fronts. These include, as I have discussed earlier in this section, Ou Ning’s identification with the republican-era RRM, as well as his alignment with the economic analysis of Wen Tiejun. The conceptual framework for the Bishan Project also extends
beyond rural reconstruction in China to include influences from classical anarchism, utopianism, and the back to the land movement popularized by hippie communes in the 1960s and 70s (presentation). In his notebook outlining the theoretical blueprint for Bishan, Ou states that the project’s main tenets are “Ruralism” and “Anarchism” (*How to Start Your Own Utopia* 52), presenting Yan Yangchu and anarchist scholar Peter Kropotkin as the “Pantheon” (*How to Start Your Own Utopia* 53). Ou finds Kropotkin’s theories on mutual aid particularly compelling, claiming that it was widely practiced in traditional rural Chinese society in the form of labour exchange (personal interview). He also draws inspiration from the utopian architectural schemes of Le Corbusier, Antonio Sant’Elia, and Peter Cook. Ou’s conception of the Bishan Project is thus based on a wide range of theories and ideologies gathered through his extensive research.
SECTION II: PLACE CONSTRUCTION AND THE BISHAN PROJECT

In considering the eclectic nature of the Bishan Project’s theoretical background and the diversity of the activities that the project encompasses, I am faced with the question of how to engage with these various elements in a cohesive and meaningful way. I wish to return to David Harvey’s essay “From space to place and back again” with the hope that it might reveal some of the links between the conceptualization of the project and the material practices that it encompasses. In this essay, Harvey examines the significance of place under the current conditions of global capitalism, explaining why “the elaboration of place-bound identities has become more rather than less important in a world of diminishing spatial barriers to exchange, movement and communication” (4). He claims that place, like space, is socially constructed, offering two very different accounts of this process. The first draws on Marxist theory to explain how the increased mobility of capital has led to competition between places as they seek to highlight the qualities that make them attractive to capitalist development (7). The second employs Heidegger’s understanding of place as “‘the locale of the truth of Being’” (quoted in Harvey, 9). Here Harvey emphasizes Heidegger’s belief that the “rootedness” of human existence in place is threatened by technological development, marketization and commodification (12). Heidegger’s example of the Black Forest farmhouse represents an alternative to the alienation of the modern experience, where a sense of being in place is achieved through dwelling (10-11). Place construction, in the Heideggerian sense, is thus “about the recovery of roots, the recovery of the art of dwelling” (11). Harvey believes that the concerns articulated by Heidegger may inspire people to resist the dominance of modern political and economic processes by engaging in “alternative constructions of place” (12).

Harvey proceeds to highlight the differences between the Marxist and Heideggerian approaches before attempting to reconcile the two. He claims that while Marx is concerned with
universal conditions that must be “rescued by a global, political-economic strategy,” Heidegger “rejects any sense of moral responsibility beyond the world of immediate sensuous and contemplative experience” (13). While these two arguments may initially seem to have very different implications for approaching place construction, Harvey maintains that they are connected:

Yet it is, paradoxically, the very conditions against which Heidegger revolts which permit the search for an imagined authentic community to become a practical proposition. The long historical geography of capitalism has so liberated us from spatial constraints that we can imagine communities independently of existing places and set about the construction of new places to house such communities in ways that were impossible before. (17)

Seeking a conceptual framework that bridges the Marxist and Heideggerian arguments, Harvey turns to Henri Lefebvre’s spatial triad, which proposes that the production of space be envisaged as a dialectical interaction between the perceived, the conceived and the lived (Lefebvre, 39). For Harvey, this model provides “a way to think through how places are constructed and experienced as material artefacts; how they are represented in discourse; and how they are used in turn as representations, as ‘symbolic places’, in contemporary culture” (17). An understanding of the social production of place cannot be limited to the global conditions that shape and define places, nor can it be reduced to an attempt to recover an authentic mode of dwelling. Place as it is imagined or represented is, according to Harvey, “dialectically interrelated” to how it is materially constructed and experienced (17). His effort to traverse the Marxist and Heideggerian positions reveals the possibility for a more nuanced understanding of place construction.

The concepts put forward in Harvey’s essay offer a framework for conceiving how the various practices of the Bishan Project contribute to a larger task of place construction (or
reconstruction, given that Bishan is an already-existing place). As Harvey demonstrates, the practice of place construction can have significant political implications:

There is, then, a politics to place construction ranging dialectically across material, representational and symbolic activities which find their hallmark in the way in which individuals invest in places and thereby empower themselves collectively by virtue of that investment. The investment can be of blood, sweat, tears and labour (the kind of building of affection through working to build the tangible product of place). Or it can be the discursive construction of affective loyalties though preservation of particular qualities of place and vernacular traditions; or new works of art which celebrate or (as with artefacts in the built environment) become symbolic of place. And it is precisely in this realm that the intertwining with place of all those other political values of community, of nation and the like, begins its work. (“From Space to Place” 23-24)

I intend to proceed by examining in more detail the material, representational and symbolic practices that constitute the Bishan Project. Although I will use these three categories to structure my investigation, there is inevitably a great deal of overlap between them. I am less interested in neatly classifying the project’s activities, and more interested in how its different elements intersect to (re)construct Bishan as a place. As the Bishan Project is an endeavor of considerable breadth, my study will not encompass all of its activities; instead, it will address cases that exemplify the diversity of the initiatives that contribute to place construction. I hope my analysis will open up a basis for examining the problems and contradictions inherent in the project, and also provide context to the question of whether the project will be able to foster the “political values of community” envisaged by Ou.
SECTION III: MATERIAL PRACTICE

Many of the Bishan Project’s material activities have been directed towards the restoration and preservation of local architecture. Like those of its neighboring villages, Bishan’s historical residences and ancestral halls display architectural features characteristic of the Huizhou region: black tiled roofs, whitewashed “horse head” firewalls (马头墙), and courtyards with open roofs or “sky wells” (天井) that let in light and rain. While historical architecture in Xidi and Hongcun is protected by the villages’ statuses as UNESCO heritage sites, many of Bishan’s old buildings have been neglected or torn down. Wang Shouchang, a Bishan resident and local historian, notes that of the fifty ancestral halls that once existed in the village, only a few over ten remain (personal interview). Ancestral halls are ubiquitous in most Huizhou villages, and were originally used by clans for performing ceremonies and keeping genealogical records (Fang 11). As Wang mentions, after the founding of the People’s Republic, ancestral halls were repurposed for other functions in the village (personal interview). Traditional Hui-style dwellings in Bishan, many of them empty, are now interspersed with newly built houses.

After purchasing his house in Bishan in 2010, Ou restored it and named it the Buffalo Institute (niu yuan 牛院儿). He now resides there with his family year-round. Renovations have left the original structure of the house intact, adding modern features such as air conditioning units, Wi-Fi, and attached bathrooms to the house’s many guest rooms. The house is simply decorated, with little added ornamentation aside from photographs and posters on the walls and Ou’s substantial collection of books. Large tables accommodate the numerous guests that come to Bishan to visit, conduct research, or collaborate with Ou. Like most of the homes in the village, the doors of the Buffalo Institute are left open in the daytime, and village residents frequently pass though. Zuo Jing has also purchased a Hui-style house, which was undergoing renovation during my visit in summer 2014. Ou believes that the efforts he and his colleagues have made to
restore old houses will change how villagers perceive their historical architecture: “When they drop by here, they will see that the houses they don’t like can actually be renovated to be very comfortable; they will once again appreciate the value of their houses” (personal interview). In addition to being a home for Ou Ning and his family, the Buffalo Institute has other important functions within the Bishan Project. To the villagers that see their old homes as outdated, the house offers an example of traditional architecture that has been adapted to modern standards of comfort. For the visitors that come to learn or to assist with the project, the Buffalo Institute is a place to meet, exchange ideas, and plan for the future.

Of the Bishan Project’s material endeavors, the Bishan bookstore (碧山书局) is so far perhaps the most visible and accessible to both residents and visitors. The bookstore is a branch of the Librairie Avant-Garde (先锋书店), an independent bookstore in Nanjing owned by Qian Xiaohua, also a friend of Ou Ning’s. Located in a converted underground parking lot that had previously been a bomb shelter, Nanjing’s Librairie Avant-Garde was declared “China’s most beautiful bookshop” by CNN in 2013 (Wong). As Qian Xiaohua recalls, when Ou Ning first proposed that he open a branch of his store in Bishan over a meal, he did not even know where the village was located (personal interview). Following his first visit to Bishan in 2011, Qian began negotiations with the village and country governments to convert an ancestral hall into a bookstore (people.cn). After three months and more than 1.4 million RMB of renovations, the Bishan bookstore opened in April 2014 (personal interview, people.cn).

The bookstore is located in a Wang clan ancestral hall, which the county government has offered rent-free to Qian Xiaohua for fifty years (personal interview). Before the renovations, the ancestral hall was used for storage and housing livestock. As with Ou Ning’s house, renovations have maintained the building’s original structure and appearance; in the main hall, the walls and wooden beams have been left unpainted, and the original stone floor has been preserved. The
walls are lined with shelves of books with topics ranging from humanities and art to politics, rural reconstruction, and local history. The bookstore also sells publications of magazines edited by Ou Ning and Zuo Jing, as well as post cards and maps featuring ink drawings by store employee Wang Shouchang. In the back of the main hall there is a section of couches and armchairs where people are encouraged to sit and read. During the wet season, rain falls through the open roof onto potted plants displayed in the inner courtyard (books located in damp areas are covered with plastic at night to protect them from the humidity). The upper floor of the bookstore, previously home to roosting bats, has been refinished with wood and now houses a coffee shop and a collection of donated foreign language books. The atmosphere of the bookstore is generally quiet, with people stopping in to read, browse books and souvenirs, drink coffee, and view the restored architecture.

While Qian Xiaohua has invested a large sum of money into the renovation and operation of the bookstore, he maintains he is not concerned with profits (personal interview). For Qian, the purpose of the bookstore is to build a “humanistic ideal,” and foster “common spirit, common space, common care” (personal interview). Qian believes that both the bookstore and the Bishan project are expressions of a shared community (personal interview). Ou Ning claims that that the bookstore has become a well-liked public space in Bishan, pointing out that elderly residents come to read books, and young people come from the county seat to use the Internet (presentation). As Qian mentions, the bookstore is also intended to function as a site for public cultural events (personal interview). In July 2014, there was a reading group at the bookstore featuring a lecture by Beijing artist and writer Wang Jiyu (Bishan Commune’s Facebook page). Several of Bishan’s elders participated in the event as discussants (Bishan Commune’s Facebook page). In October 2014, the bookstore hosted an interactive art game and performance organized by the Danish music collective YOYOOYOY (Bishan Commune’s Facebook page).
Photographs of the participants and spectators at both events feature visitors alongside many familiar faces from Bishan (Bishan Commune’s Facebook page).

At the time of my visit in summer 2014, the bookstore’s staff consisted of Wang Shouchang, Xinghua, a young man from Yixian’s county seat, and Tang Xue, Ou’s fiancée and manager of the Bishan bookstore. All of them agree that the bookstore is a positive step towards engaging the local population of Bishan. As Mai Corlin, a PhD student from Aarhus University studying the Bishan Project, points out, Wang Shouchang believes that many of the villagers who do not fully understand the Bishan Project see the bookstore as “the only tangible thing that Ou and Zuo have done so far” (“Fieldwork notes,” quoting Wang in Sun Yunfan and Leah Thompson’s film “Down to the Countryside”). Tang Xue stresses that she hopes that the bookstore will become a part of the daily life of village residents, and welcomes their presence in the bookstore regardless of whether they spend any money there (personal interview). Xinghua explains that when the bookstore first opened, many villagers, aware of the large sum of money invested in the bookstore, were reluctant to touch anything for fear that they would damage it (personal interview). He remarks that many residents have gradually become more relaxed in the bookstore, reading books and taking notes on things that interest them (personal interview).

Xinghua believes that the bookstore presents an opportunity for Bishan’s residents to reflect on how the village has changed throughout their lifetimes:

More and more people are coming upstairs to the second floor, like yesterday, when a group of elderly ladies came in. They talk about the bookstore’s past, what the ancestral hall used to be like. And also what other ancestral halls in the area were like, although some of them may be not exist any more. And through this, they will slowly recall a memory. This is a very good thing… Because here, the local people’s understanding of their locality… while it might not have any written record, they still these have moments
in their memory, and this way many local people can start a conversation. (personal interview)

As a structure that has undergone several transformations over the past 65 years, the restored ancestral hall offers a platform for local people to discuss their shared memories of their village. Several of the village residents I spoke to stated that they were pleased with the bookstore’s restoration (informal conversations on July 6, 9, and 15). On the day of their visit, one of the women in the group that Xinghua refers to expressed her approval of the changes, informing me that prior to renovations, the second floor of the bookstore was completely covered in bat droppings (informal conversation on July 15). While the renovations of the old ancestral hall are part of an effort to preserve the region’s traditional vernacular architecture, the bookstore is not designed to function as a museum or relic of the past on display for tourists. Instead, it is intended to serve as a public space for both visitors and locals, one that aims to be part of the everyday lived experiences of Bishan’s residents. Ou Ning and Qian Xiaohua also hope that the bookstore will fill a unique role in the village as a place for Bishan’s residents to explore their intellectual interests and participate in cultural events. Both Wang Shouchang and Tang Xue mention the importance of restoring China’s “farming culture” (农耕文化) (personal interviews on June 24 and July 16), a historical tradition that embraces the pursuit of intellectual activities alongside agricultural labour. The bookstore offers a space for these activities as well as a platform for cultural exchange between village residents and visitors to Bishan.

Despite Ou and Qian’s desire to make the Bishan bookstore a common space for locals and visitors alike, some villagers’ comments indicate that they do not see the store as a significant aspect of public life for many of Bishan’s residents. One resident told me that while he enjoys the bookstore and was happy to see it attracting visitors from abroad, he does not believe that it offers any direct benefit to most of the villagers who have little time for reading.
during the busy farming season (informal conversation on July 9[1]). He remarks that while the owners of the local hotel might make money from visiting tourists, the majority of the villagers will not profit in the same way (informal conversation on July 9[1]). In Sun Yunfan and Leah Thomspn’s documentary, another villager, shop owner Hu Yongfeng, is doubtful of the bookstore’s ability to succeed in the countryside, claiming that many people in Bishan would rather play mahjong than buy books (“Down to the Countryside”). While the Bishan bookstore attempts to be an inclusive and accessible public space for village residents, these comments suggest that it is still removed from the daily experiences of many people living in Bishan.

The most recent of the Bishan Project’s material endeavors is Ou Ning’s purchase and renovation of Qi Yuan Tang, another former Wang clan hall, to become the School of Tillers (Li Nong Guan/理農館) (School of Tillers Facebook Page, Linongguan zhaomu). In an announcement posted online seeking volunteers to help with the project, Ou describes the School of Tillers as “A Space for Contemporary Agrarianists” (School of Tillers Facebook Page). Located next to the Buffalo Institute, the building was used for grain storage after 1949, and has been empty for the past several years. Ou purchased the dilapidated hall in June 2014 at the request of Bishan’s village committee and began renovations in November 2014 (School of Tillers Facebook Page). The building’s reconstruction is expected to be complete by May 2015 (School of Tillers Facebook Page). The 260 square meter plot will eventually house a gallery, curated library, tea room, café, shop, researcher residence and learning center (School of Tillers Facebook Page). As Ou points out, the institution’s English name is a translation of the Hundred Schools of Thought philosophy of Agriculturalism, which advocated an egalitarian society where rulers worked alongside farmers in the fields (School of Tillers Facebook Page). In addition, the School’s Chinese name has the dual connotations of “understand agriculture (理解农业)” and “take care of agriculture (打理农业)” (School of Tillers Facebook Page). As a tribute to
Shennong, the legendary forefather of Chinese agriculture and a revered figure in Agriculturalism, Ou plans to include his image on a new screen wall in the inner courtyard (School of Tillers Facebook Page).

During my visit to Bishan, Ou discussed his plans for Qi Yuan Tang with Qian Xiaohua and architect Zhang Lei. As Ou comments, “It does not have any value as a historical relic, so it’s possible to do something completely different with it… but it will still be very rustic, just not in the Hui style” (personal interview). Zhang Lei also noted that the building’s original structure does not follow the form of traditional Hui architecture (personal interview). Two-dimensional computer aided design drawings of the School of Tillers indicate a departure from historical Hui design (School of Tillers Facebook page). The inner courtyard will feature a conically shaped tea room in the style of dwellings from Banpo, a Neolithic settlement located in present-day Shaanxi (weixin.qq.cn). The roof of the tea room will be thatched or shingled, and feature a circle of glass in the middle, which will allow light from the tea room’s interior to shine through at night (weixin.qq.cn). Upstairs, the curated library and learning center will feature moveable bookshelves (School of Tillers Facebook page). While the Bishan Project’s earlier restoration efforts aimed to preserve traditional Hui-style architecture, these plans reveal Ou Ning’s desire to introduce different architectural styles and innovative features into the project’s material practice.

Though the architectural design of the School of Tillers incorporates influences from outside Bishan, many of its proposed functions are related to the Bishan Project’s local interests. The gallery will feature exhibits on subjects relevant to the project including farming, handicrafts, rural reconstruction and regional culture (School of Tillers Facebook Page). According to Ou, the learning center will organize workshops where people can learn agricultural and artisanal skills from villagers in the traditional style of apprenticeship (School of Tillers Facebook Page). Participants will be expected to pay for the sessions, which may be held in the learning center, in
farmers’ houses, or in the fields (School of Tillers Facebook Page). This program presents an opportunity to involve people from Bishan and Yi County in the Bishan Project and may provide an additional source of income to farmers and artisans. It also offers local people the chance to share traditional crafts and farming techniques and encourage their continued practice. As another means of engaging village residents, Ou Ning chose to employ local artisans in the process of renovating the School of Tillers. One photo on the School of Tillers Facebook page features local carpenter Mr. Gui, with his statement, “Happiness is working and earning money.”

The store and coffee shop in the School of Tillers may also offer potential employment opportunities for local people. The School of Tillers is thus intended to function as a space for the study and celebration of rural life. In addition, Ou Ning hopes that the construction and operation of the School will provide some tangible financial benefits to the people of Bishan.

Throughout the process of planning and implementing material reconstruction efforts in Bishan, Ou and his colleagues have emphasized the importance of adapting to local construction practices. During my visit, Qian Xiaohua and architect Zhang Lei were discussing the possibility of opening a coffee shop in an old shed next to the Bishan bookstore (personal interview). Zhang Lei notes that when working on construction projects in rural areas, it is important to first discuss with local workers what they excel at building and what materials they have available (personal interview). Zhang Lei believes that there are multiple benefits to working with local artisans: “It is best to find local people to build houses…On one hand it helps them by giving them work, and on the other it helps them recognize the value of these old things, these old skills in today’s environment” (personal interview). He also notes that restoring old houses provides an opportunity for artisans to use and pass on traditional techniques that might otherwise be lost (personal interview). Both Ou Ning and Zhang Lei are interested in vernacular architecture, or what they refer to as “architecture without architects” (personal interview), terms that were
popularized by Bernard Rudofsky in the 1960s (Rudofsky 2). During my stay in Bishan, Ou Ning was reading Lloyd Kahn’s *Shelter*, which features examples of vernacular architecture from the 1960s counterculture movement in America as well as other parts of the world (“Shelter”). Ou explains that he is interested in architecture designed by the people who will use it and built with available materials, much like Bishan’s Hui-style houses (personal interview). While he plans to introduce new forms of vernacular architecture to Bishan (as exemplified by the School of Tillers), he maintains that, “the form is different but the spirit is the same” (personal interview).

Ou and his colleagues have embarked on these material projects in Bishan with a strong conviction to protect the physical remnants of Bishan’s cultural heritage. Through their reconstruction projects, Ou and his colleagues aspire to celebrate the region’s vernacular architectural tradition and instill an appreciation for historical buildings among local residents. The restored buildings may offer local people a way to connect to their memories and contribute positively to their experience of Bishan as a place. While these efforts seem to correspond to Heidegger’s appeal to return to a more authentic mode of dwelling, the Bishan Project does not represent a retreat to the insularity of the Black Forest farmhouse. While discussing his interest in hippie communes and other alternative communities in North America, New Zealand, and Australia, Ou Ning points out that many of these communities operate in relative isolation from the rest of the world (personal interview). In his own work, Ou Ning rejects this concept of isolation, which he believes is unsuitable for rural reconstruction practice in China (personal interview). The material activities initiated by Ou and his colleagues are not an attempt to build a bucolic refuge from the realities of modern urban life. Instead, the Buffalo Institute, the Bishan bookstore and the School of Tillers are all intended to facilitate more connections between Bishan and the rest of the world. Ou and his colleagues also hope that they will serve as a site for learning and exchange for both local people and visitors to the village. These buildings are
intended to foster new opportunities for growth and progress within Bishan and also within wider intellectual and artistic communities.
SECTION IV: VISIBILITY

In this section I intend to examine how initiatives associated with visibility encompassed in the Bishan Project contribute to the reconstruction of Bishan and other villages in Yi County. Harvey uses the term “representational” to describe practices that shape how places are perceived (“From Space to Place” 17). However, as Gayatri Spivak famously discusses in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the notion of “representation” contains two layers of meaning, the meanings of representation as “speaking for,” in the sense of political representation, and the “re-presentation” of philosophy or art that endeavors to create a portrait or a “stage” for the subaltern, for the unspeaking world. In a sense, the task of re-presenting the subaltern Spivak talks about can be translated into the task of place construction through representational activities.

The activities related to perception that I intend to discuss in this section are less concerned with “speaking for” Bishan’s residents and more concerned with making aspects of rural places such as Bishan and other villages in Yi County, including local histories, art, crafts and skills, visible to the rest of the world. As I discussed in Section I, Ou Ning is critical of the urban-rural dichotomy that privileges urban areas as sites of economic and cultural production, and reduces the conception of rural areas as a “blank space”. In this section, I will examine how the Bishan Project challenges this hegemonic vision of the countryside by making the historical and cultural value of villages visible.

One of the Bishan Project’s early initiatives, the Harvestival, offers an example of this effort to reconstruct place through re-presentation. The Harvestival was a public art event in Bishan organized by Ou Ning and Zuo Jing with the help of their colleagues and volunteers. The first Harvestival occurred over several days in 2011 and hosted artists, designers, and specialists in rural reconstruction from several different countries (Ou, “Bishan Project”). The event included performances, film and documentary screenings, workshops, exhibitions on local
handicrafts and the history of Bishan village, as well as panel discussions on rural reconstruction (Ou, “Bishan Project”). Following the success of the first Harvestival, the Yi county government invited Ou and Zuo to curate the annual Yi County photo festival, which was scheduled to take place at the same time as the 2012 Harvestival (“Rural Reconstruction in China”). However, the county government cancelled both events with less than a day’s notice at the request of the central authorities over the concern that they were scheduled too close to the 18th CPC National Congress (Thompson). Since many of the international guests arrived before the festival was cancelled, some events still continued underground, including film screenings and live performances from visiting musicians (Thompson).

As a public art event, the Harvestival incorporated a diverse range of material, representational (or visibility-oriented), and symbolic activities. The conversion of old ancestral halls and former granaries into exhibition halls was, for example, a material project that transformed largely empty and abandoned spaces into public sites of cultural activity (Zhao). The outdoor film screening titled “Nostalgia on Screen” featuring the 1970s film Xiao Hua (which was filmed in Bishan), suggests a symbolic appeal to Bishan residents memories’ of their village (Ou Ning’s Facebook page). While the Harvestival can be discussed in terms of its material and symbolic practices, I have chosen to include my discussion of the Harvestival in this section because I believe that one of its most important functions is linked to the notion of perception. Ou Ning’s critique of the urban dominance over the realms of contemporary artistic and cultural production relates to his motive to organize a contemporary art festival in Bishan. As a public event that celebrates art, music and film from all over the world, the Harvestival confronts the perception of rural areas as backward or culturally void. The theme of the 2012 Yi County International Photo Festival, “The Interactions” (城乡交响曲), is particularly illustrative of Ou and Zuo’s desire to challenge the urban-rural hierarchy:
We want to make Yixian a research site in order to open up research into today’s Chinese and Asian urban/rural divide. For this reason, the subject for this year’s festival is “Interactions”. The festival will devote itself to exploring positive models for the contemporary relationship between city and countryside, working hard to make this a mutually nurturing relationship in a contemporary context. (Ou, *The Interactions* 14)

The title “Interactions” implies both a reflection on the current state of urban-rural relations and also an effort to conceive of more mutually constructive forms of engagement between urban and rural areas. The Photo Festival is divided into sections that explore different themes related to this agenda. “The Enigma of Urbanization” features images that explore the consequences of rapid urban development, such as photographer and filmmaker Wang Jiuliang’s exhibition, *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, featuring photographs of the enormous landfills surrounding Beijing that were also the subject of Wang’s 2011 documentary film of the same title (Ou, *The Interactions* 42). Wang’s photographs depict people and livestock foraging among heaps of trash that stretch into the horizon, displaying an often unseen side of Beijing’s urban landscape (*The Interactions* 44-45). A section titled “Between Town and Country” includes exhibits that explore the “transitional spaces” between rural and urban areas that have emerged as part of the process of China’s urbanization (Ou, *The Interactions* 113). Exhibits include photographs produced as part of Ou Ning’s *San Yuan Li* project, as well as an exhibition based on the 2009 documentary *Last Train Home*, which records the journey of a rural migrant family back to their hometown for the Spring Festival (*The Interactions* 130-137). Both of these exhibits focus on the in-betweenness experienced by people whose lives have been profoundly affected by China’s rapid urbanization. The visual experience offered by the Photo Festival was thus designed to draw attention to the ways in which urbanization has shaped rural and urban space, as well as how it has affected China’s most vulnerable populations. Ou and Zuo’s decision to stage an
international art festival in Yi County’s villages underscores their desire to make rural places visible as sites of cultural activity.

Another significant example of a visibility-oriented activity is Yixian Baigong (黟县百工), Zuo Jing’s endeavor to compile and publish a record of traditional handicrafts in Yi County. The project, roughly translated as “The Many Crafts of Yi County,” involved more than ten student volunteers from Anhui University who conducted fieldwork in Yi County from 2011 to 2013 (Yixian Baigong, 2). The students interviewed and photographed artisans at work, documenting eighty-nine traditional skills and crafts (Yixian Baigong, 2). Their research was compiled into a 440-page book edited by Zuo Jing, which was published in 2014. The book is divided into seven sections: food and drink; the use of tools, featuring skills such as wood and stone carving; “life arts,” including farming techniques and fabric production; appliances and household items; traditional customs; residential construction; and material repairs (Yixian Baigong 4-5). The skills and handicrafts featured in the book range from the intricate and ceremonial (seal stamp carving, traditional dance), to the everyday (making fresh tofu, repairing shoes) (Yixian Baigong 4-5).

In a personal interview, Zuo Jing mentions that seeing the restoration of the first Pig’s Inn in Xidi was a major source of inspiration for the project, as the different aspects of construction all required specific skills, from woodworking to architectural composition. Zuo Jing believes it is necessary to “excavate” these skills and apply them in a contemporary context (personal interview). In the introduction to Yixian Baigong, Zuo summarizes the project’s primary objectives:

The first is to collect and arrange information in an archival format, faithfully recording every craft’s season, procedure, and application; the second is, through the research of handicrafts, to understand artisans and their spiritual world, their attitudes towards life,
along with the present socio-economic conditions of Huizhou villages, including the proportion of artisans’ household income derived from handicrafts, the effects of the incursion of manufactured goods on handicrafts et cetera; the third and most important point is to learn from artisans, explore the fusion of new and old objects, to generate the renewal of folk crafts. (Yixian Baigong 3)

As an effort to shape the perception of Yi County’s villages, Yixian Baigong thus fulfills several purposes. In its most basic sense, it is a catalogue of local knowledge that is inherently linked to the region’s history and natural environment. At the same time, it is also intended to reveal something about the role of handcrafting in Yi County’s villages and how traditional artisanal practices have been affected by the proliferation of factory-produced goods. It is, then, part of the broader story of modernization and its consequences for places in China. In rigorously cataloguing the region’s traditional skills and handicrafts, Yixian Baigong also indicates that these forms of local knowledge are worthy of being studied and passed down to future generations. Ou Ning believes that the project provides an alternative means of viewing Yi County’s history. As Ou points out, “History is not simply the expansion of borders, or the transition between dynasties, it also includes the gradual flow of people’s daily lives” (Xianzai difang shenghuo shi). In addition to being a tool for the study and development of the region’s folk handicrafts, Yixian Baigong also asserts the importance of lived experience, through the material reflections of everyday life, in the conceptualization of a local history.

In order to better understand how Yixian Baigong represents Yi County through the study of local handicrafts, I wish to examine two sections of the book in more detail. The first is an essay on “hairy” fermented tofu (mao doufu) made by Kang Runwu in Guzhu village, written by Wang Lingling (92-94). The second is Guo Chen’s essay on Huizhou woodcarving (Huizhou mudiao) by Wang Dehong of Hongcun (129-131). I chose these two examples because both are
well-known regional specialties that also reflect the diversity of the skills featured in *Yixian Baigong*. The two sections go beyond simply providing a description of how the products are made; they also address issues of locality, livelihood, and the preservation of tradition. The opening paragraphs of both sections attempt to evoke a strong sense of place. In her essay on hairy tofu, Wang Lingling begins by recounting her exchange with a local driver on their way to Guzhu village:

> We went to Guzhu in the afternoon, our driver was coincidentally from the village. We asked about hairy tofu, she seemed deeply touched. The village once had two people making hairy tofu, but the younger left to work outside the village, leaving only the elder. She dropped us off at the entrance of the house. Two green iron doors, inside the courtyard a damp old wooden table, and an old wooden bench, the counter used to sell tofu every morning. (92)

The driver’s response to their inquiries seems to be prompted by her personal connection to her hometown, suggesting that this tofu is part of the shared experience of Guzhu’s residents. Wang’s description of the courtyard and sales counter provides a visual reference for the reader to imagine villagers passing through the courtyard gates to purchase tofu on a daily basis. The opening sentences of Guo Chen’s essay also paint a vivid picture of Hongcun:

> At the beginning of April Yi County suddenly becomes warm, and tourists are already hurriedly coming to admire the rapeseed flowers stretching as far as the eye can see. After some complications, I was finally able to enter Hongcun to pay a visit to woodcarver Wang Dehong. Entering Hongcun’s main gates, passing over South Lake, walking down old alleys with over 900 years of history, the poetic beauty was striking. Arriving at the large tree in front of a pavilion, the guide pointed, “That’s the woodcarving studio you are looking for.” (129)
In this paragraph, Guo captures the picturesque charm that draws tourists to the region and to Hongcun in particular. Guo also emphasizes the village’s history, setting the tone for his discussion of Huizhou woodcarving as a historical tradition. The particular historical and geographic context in which these artisanal practices are embedded is thus an important part of the content of *Yixian Baigong*. Whether through their role in the daily lives of local people or their relationship to regional history, these crafts are intrinsically connected to the places where they are produced.

In addition to creating a sense of place, both sections also offer biographical details about the artisans who produce their respective crafts. According to Wang’s report, Kang Runwu is a third generation tofu maker who learned the craft at a young age (92). Born in 1952, Kang left school in grade two due to his household’s financial circumstances, and at age eight started to help his family make tofu (92). Kang still uses his father’s bamboo boxes to ferment his tofu; they are now several decades old (93). For the first half of 2012, Kang made hairy tofu in a restaurant in Shanghai for a monthly salary of 3600 yuan (93). When he proposed to his boss that he earn a percentage of tofu sales, his boss refused and Kang decided to move back to Guzhu (93). In order to support themselves and their two young grandsons who live with them, Kang and his wife supplement their income from selling tofu with other temporary work such as farming and picking tea (93). As Wang Lingling points out, the price of soybeans has increased at a much higher proportional rate than the price of hairy tofu, significantly limiting Kang’s profits (93). Kang believes, however, that selling tofu offers a necessary supplement to farm work, as he claims, “ordinary people can’t survive from farming alone” (93). As a rural resident raising his grandchildren while his son and daughter-in-law work elsewhere, Kang’s circumstances reflect those of many rural families. For Kang, the continued practice of this traditional craft has a significant bearing on his family’s livelihood.
Woodcarver Wang Dehong was 42 years old at the time of his interview, younger than most of the artisans featured in *Yixian Baigong* (131). Wang was born in Hongcun, and while he was admitted into high school he was unable to attend due to “family reasons”, instead attending in a vocational college in Jiangxi for woodcarving (129). Wang ran a successful woodcarving business in Jiangxi, but eventually decided to return to Hongcun, as he explains to Guo Chen:

Master Wang said, his native place of Huizhou is where Hui-style woodcarving originated, the numerous woodcarving archetypes found in Yi County’s traditional Hui-style architecture offer a wealth of topics for his own work, most importantly, Hui-style woodcarving has declined significantly in recent years, he hopes to use Hongcun’s status as a tourist destination to popularize Hui-style woodcarving, to make more people understand it. (129-130)

These comments reveal Wang’s appreciation for the historical legacy of Hui-style woodcarving, and also suggest a sense of responsibility to revive this aspect of his region’s cultural heritage.

The biographical details presented in both sections illuminate how Wang Dehong’s and Kang Runwu’s work has been shaped by their locales. On one hand Kang and Wang are contributing to the preservation of practices that characterize their region’s traditional culture, an effort that Wang is particularly conscious of. On the other hand, their work as artisans is their livelihood, influenced in part by the realities of their social and economic conditions. In this sense, Wang Dehong’s and Kang Runwu’s experiences are part of the broader story of the challenges faced by much of China’s rural population: the lack of educational and employment opportunities in rural areas; the separation of families as young people move away to find work; and the pressure exacted on small rural businesses by the contemporary market economy. As much as *Yixian Baigong* emphasizes the specificity of place, it also underscores the wider problems that threaten
this specificity, revealing the destructive consequences of urbanization, industrialization and marketization for China’s rural communities.

While the publication of *Yixian Baigong* is a significant achievement, Zuo Jing has additional plans for the project’s sustained role in the preservation and development of artisanship in Yi County. Zuo hopes that the project will provide a platform for collaboration between professional designers and Yi County’s local artisans. He elaborates on this in the introduction to *Yixian Baigong*: “There is also a hope to build a bridge between designers and artists and folk artisans, to improve relatively outdated crafts and design, to make them more suited to the demands of contemporary life, to ensure that handicrafts and the characteristics of farming culture that they sustain are passed on” (3). While Zuo Jing appreciates the history behind traditional handicrafts, he also believes it is necessary to revise them to ensure their continued relevance in contemporary society. Wang Dehong echoes this sentiment in comments on his own woodcarving practice; he wants to carve images that reflect contemporary life, pointing out that traditional skills were constantly being reinvented while they were passed down (131). While notions of history, tradition and place feature prominently in Yixian Baigong, the project does not present traditional handicrafts as static relics of the past, nor does it encourage an insular approach to the preservation of local traditions. Instead, Yixian Baigong aspires to open up new channels of exchange and development for artisanal skills in Yi County.

Zuo Jing believes that working to develop and promote the region’s handicrafts will offer economic benefits to local artisans. He hopes that cooperation with professional designers will help expose Yi County’s handicrafts to a larger market, and has considered opening an online store to sell local products (personal interview). However, he claims that economic concerns do not represent the “main direction of thinking” for the Bishan Project: “Most importantly, take for example the renewal of public cultural life, we hope that its spiritual and cultural aspects will be
enriched, and not as monotonous as it is now” (personal interview). According to Zuo, promoting a deeper awareness among villagers of their village’s local history is an important part of this renewal (personal interview). He offers the example of street signs: while streets in villages may have historical names, there are few street signs in villages today (personal interview). Zuo believes that posting street signs will have a positive impact on how village residents perceive their hometown: “Many of them may not know the names of the streets, if the names are suddenly restored, they will feel like their village has history” (personal interview). He is also interested in creating signs that explain the historical background of old buildings (personal interview). Zuo claims that these signs would convey an important message: “This house is not nameless, it has a name; it’s history isn’t vague, it’s history is very clear” (personal interview). As Zuo notes, he and Ou Ning have already carried out one task with a similar objective: in 2012, they erected a statue of Wang Dazhi 汪达之 (1903-1980), a republican-era intellectual and rural education advocate born in Bishan, at the main entrance of the village (personal interview). Zuo’s comments reveal his desire to implement activities that help rural residents develop a more profound appreciation for their local histories, a step that Zuo believes is crucial to the cultural revitalization of villages such as Bishan.

While the endeavors that Zuo proposes above are directed primarily towards village residents, the Bishan Project also employs social media to communicate to a wide audience of people outside of the village. In addition to his blog on alternativearchive.com, Ou Ning has accounts with Chinese and American social networking services including Weibo, Wechat (微信), Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. The Bishan Commune, Bishan Bookstore and the School of Tillers also have separate accounts on Weibo and Facebook, and many posts related to the Bishan Project are shared between all pages. Ou Ning posts a wide variety of content on these accounts: information on the development of projects in Bishan; photos of the village and of
Ou’s journeys abroad; articles, interviews, and videos and other media responses to the project; and Ou’s essays on topics ranging from rural issues to contemporary art. Many of Ou’s posts emphasize the dynamic nature of the Bishan Project’s activities. In winter 2015, Ou Ning began to post regular updates on the renovation of the School of Tillers, featuring photos of the construction process in addition to drafts of the building (Linongguan Weibo page). In addition to conveying a sense of progress, Ou Ning’s use of social media also highlights the connectedness of the Bishan Project to individuals and organizations all over the world. By sharing information, images and stories about Bishan on a variety of social media platforms, Ou Ning has made the village and the project accessible to a broader international community.

As the Bishan Project’s material practices are intended to restore the physical symbols of Bishan’s history, its visibility-oriented activities aim to reassert the cultural value of Yi County’s villages. The potential implications of this process are not limited to the realm of discourse; as Harvey points out, representational practices can have significant “material consequences” for places: “The political-economic possibilities of place construction are, in short, highly coloured by the evaluative manner of place representation” (22). Both Ou Ning and Zuo Jing are aware of this, noting that their efforts have inspired more people from outside of Bishan to purchase traditional houses in the village, precipitating the increase of local housing prices (personal interview with Ou Ning, personal interview with Zuo Jing). While it is difficult at this stage to determine how the development of Bishan’s real estate market may affect the village, Zuo notes that it does allow villagers to benefit financially from the sale of their homes, many of which are unoccupied and in poor condition (personal interview). They are also particularly concerned with how Bishan is perceived as a tourist destination. Ou Ning is critical of the model of tourism development adopted in villages such as Xidi and Hongcun, where the rights to tourism development are owned either by the village committee (as in Xidi), or by an external company.
(as in Hongcun, where the village’s tourism business is controlled by the Beijing-based Zhongkun Group) (Ying and Zhou, 100-101). In both cases, the entrances to the villages are regulated and visitors are expected to pay an entry fee of approximately one hundred yuan. A portion of the revenue from ticket sales is allocated to village residents, though the majority of the profits go to the organization that owns the rights to the village’s tourism business (Ying and Zhou, 102). Ou believes that village residents have very little agency under this system, and instead wants to create a new model of tourism where “the villagers are the agents” (personal interview).

The model that Ou envisions for Bishan is one where visitors freely come and go, and villagers who wish to profit from tourism have the opportunity to set up their own small businesses (personal interview). Ou points to guesthouses as an example; villagers with extra rooms in their houses could offer lodging and meals to visitors interested in experiencing rural life (personal interview). He maintains that this way, one company or organization does not monopolize the village, and residents can choose to earn money from tourism independently (personal interview). Ou also wants to avoid the overly commercial atmosphere that he has observed in villages such as Xidi and Hongcun, noting that visitors to these villages are frequently approached in the streets by people seeking business for their guesthouses or selling factory-produced souvenirs (personal interview). In his presentation to students from Nanjing University’s summer program, Ou uses the word “ecotourism” to describe the alternative model of tourism that he hopes to encourage in Bishan, a term associated with the values of environmental sustainability and social responsibility (presentation). Zuo Jing believes that the Bishan Project’s emphasis on art will also help facilitate new forms of tourism: “This isn’t the superficial kind of tourism where people see places in a passing glance, it is an experiential form of tourism. People can experience farming culture, and they can also experience contemporary
art” (personal interview). Zuo’s comments indicate that he hopes tourism will facilitate a deeper appreciation for the culture of villages in Yi County. The integration of contemporary art into tourists’ experiences of villages has the potential to subvert the prevailing model of rural tourism that portrays villages as historical relics frozen in time. In addition, Zuo’s emphasis on experience suggests that tourists should not simply be passive consumers of rural scenery but should be socially and culturally engaged with the places they visit.

In this section I have attempted to illustrate how the activities concerned with visibility employed by Ou Ning and Zuo Jing contribute to an alternative perception of Bishan and other villages in Yi County as part of their larger project of place reconstruction. The Bishan Harvestival challenges the cultural hegemony of the urban-centric global economy by making rural places visible in the realms of contemporary art and culture. Yixian Baigong offers a compelling example of the Bishan Project’s effort to preserve vernacular traditions that are emblematic of the region’s rural culture. It highlights the destructive effects of “modernization” on local traditions and proposes tactics to revise traditional practices in order to ensure their continued relevance in a contemporary context. Along with Yixian Baigong, Zuo Jing’s plans to install street signs and historical explanations on buildings indicate his desire to assert the historical and cultural value of places in Yi County. While Zuo hopes that this will instill a sense of pride among rural residents in their villages’ histories, it also has implications for how Bishan and other villages in Yi County are perceived by outsiders. Ou Ning’s use of social media serves to promote an awareness of region and the Bishan Project among a wide audience that may not have otherwise known about Bishan or the current efforts to revitalize the village. The attention generated by the Bishan Project’s visibility-oriented activities, especially those that emphasize the cultural heritage of villages, may facilitate the growth of tourism in the region. However, Ou and Zuo are particularly cautious of the image projected of Bishan as a tourist destination. While
Ou and Zuo are not opposed to the development of tourism in Yi County, they do not want it to perpetuate the exploitation of the region’s villages. Instead, they hope to encourage a model that emphasizes meaningful cultural interactions over an approach based on consumption and economic gain.
SECTION V: THE RE-IMAGINING OF BISHAN

In this final section I intend to examine the symbolic activities that are part of the Bishan Project. There is an inherent challenge in defining what constitutes a “symbolic” activity in Harvey’s conception of place construction, as symbolic endeavors may be manifested in material or representational forms. Harvey’s emphasis on the link between “symbolic places” and the imagination offers some clarification of the role of symbolic activities in place construction. As Harvey states, “the creation of symbolic places is not given in the stars but painstakingly nurtured and fought over, precisely because of the hold that place can have over the imagination” (“From Space to Place and Back Again, 23). My analysis will focus on activities that contribute to the imagining of Bishan as a symbolic place. One significant example is Ou Ning’s blueprint for the Bishan Project, a hand-written notebook titled *Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia*. Ou created the book in 2010 for an exhibition hosted by the notebook company Moleskine, and it has since been exhibited in several countries (“The Bishan Project and Moleskine Notebook”). The notebook features a diverse collection of theories, case studies, and creative works that have inspired Ou in his research on alternative forms of social organization. Filled with colorful illustrations and musings on the future of the Bishan Commune, the notebook is as much a work of the imagination as it is the product of extensive research and reflection.

The notebook opens with a summary of the ideas presented by Erwin Strauss in his book, *How to Start your own Country*. Ou outlines the different methods described by Strauss for independently establishing a country, highlighting his interest in “vonu,” a libertarian approach to living “out of sight, out of mind” of the authorities governing a given territory (*How to Start Your Own Utopia*, 4; *How to Start Your Own Country*, 26). Ou believes that the model of the large nation state is not always conducive to expressions of creativity and individuality, and that
individual experiments in forming countries represent “a meaningful reflection on and
demonstration of human community” (4). Ou elaborates on the importance of this independent
political practice to his own vision of communal living:

I have no interest in creating a country with its own territory and sovereignty,
implementing a political system, forming a government, recruiting citizens, establishing
diplomatic relations and building national defense. I am concerned with implementing an
experiment in communal living according to a certain philosophy. Communal living is,
most importantly, sharing. The traditional model of countries relies on the possession and
distribution of territory, building a system of land ownership, and also requires a
government to control and administer the entire country. The concept of sharing rests in
the dissolution of ownership, and the opposition to any forms of control. Under the model
of sharing, communal life can generate a social brain, and break down the boundaries
between public and private. (6)

For Ou, the notion of independently forming a country creates the opportunity to explore
different forms of social organization. Ou’s notion of “sharing” offers an alternative to the socio-
economic institutions from which traditional nation-states derive their power over populations.

The notebook also includes an extensive list of micronations from all over the world, with
a brief description of three case studies: the Principality of Sealand, consisting of an off-shore
platform off the coast of the United Kingdom; the NSK State, an independent state formed by
Slovenian art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst; and Christiania, an autonomous community
established in 1971 in Copenhagen, Denmark (8-11). Ou notes details about each micronation
such as the creation of passports for Sealand and the NSK State, and the consensus system of
decision-making in Christiania. He then proceeds to outline the instances compiled by author
Liao Yiwu of rural people attempting to establish their own monarchies in China after 1949 (12-
13). Ou reflects on these individuals’ circumstances, stating, “I don’t see them as ignorant troublemakers, and believe that this is ultimately a reaction to the reality of their difficult situations” (14). He claims that these cases have strengthened his belief in Yan Yangchu’s philosophy of educating rural people, and demonstrates that Rural Reconstruction must continue to be developed in contemporary China (14). While China’s current political climate would prevent Ou from creating a self-declared independent country or autonomous community similar to Sealand or Christiania, these examples of micronations have influenced Ou’s plans for the Bishan Commune, as evidenced by his desire to create passports and develop a consensus system of decision-making (*How to Start Your Own Utopia* 23, personal interview). His discussion of failed monarchies in rural China after 1949 further emphasizes the need to explore alternative solutions to the problems affecting China’s rural areas.

In addition to presenting the research that has inspired Ou Ning’s efforts in Bishan, the notebook also offers a detailed rendering of Ou’s vision for the Bishan Commune. On a page with the heading “How to start your own utopia…” Ou lists the basic features of Bishan Commune, including population (“recruited online”), language (“Chinese, English [Standard Chinese, very important!]”), and economic system (“mutual aid, labor exchange”) (23). Ou also describes the Commune’s organizational format: “A society based on agriculture, anarchism (opposed to power, opposed to organization)” (23) (Figure 1). In red pen, he adds, “The Bishan Commune is not a type of government, it does not adopt the model of countries,” reiterating his aversion to establishing any form of political authority (23). Ou Ning also outlines his plans to collaborate with designers and artists to draft the Bishan Commune’s “visual system,” “architectural system,” “living system” and “broadcasting system” (23). Ou’s suggestions for the Commune’s “visual system,” for example, include a flag, an emblem, and a passport, while the “living system” incorporates clothing, household goods, and vehicles (23). Many of these ideas
are developed further in subsequent sections of the notebook, which include contributions from several artists and designers.

In the section detailing the Bishan Commune’s “visual system,” Ou Ning invites design team Xiaoma+Chengzi to create sketches of the Bishan Commune’s emblem (29-32). The initial design of the emblem is in the shape of a butterfly enclosing the Chinese character for “field” (田) (29). The designers explain that the butterfly represents the source of enlightenment in philosopher Zhuangzi’s dream, and also symbolizes intellectuals’ efforts to benefit agriculture as

Figure 1 How to Start Your Own Utopia, 23

1 All images used with permission from Ou Ning
butterflies do by pollinating crops (29) (Figure 2). However, Ou takes issue with the butterfly shape, commenting that it looks more like the logo for a travel agency than the symbol of a rural commune (29). The next version features a hammer, sickle, torch, and flag, symbols that Ou rejects for being “overused,” as he remarks, “I particularly dislike the numerous connotations that they used to bear. I think that if we are to choose two symbolic images, the pen and plow best express the philosophy of the Bishan Commune” (29). Ou’s comments suggest that he wants to avoid symbols of socialist political ideology and instead emphasize the intellectual and rural roots of the Bishan Project. The final draft of the emblem does not include a pen and plow, as Ou believes they are complicated symbols to depict (30) (Figure 3). Instead, it features the images of two books, a machine gear, rice plants, and fields in front of a mountain range that evokes Bishan’s distinctive landscape (30). According to Ou, the two books represent manuals of ruralism and anarchism (the base of the emblem also includes “R+A” in large block letters), and
the machine gear signifies “history’s progress” (30). The books reflect the ideological foundation of the Bishan Project while the machine gear implies that the efforts in Bishan should contribute to progress. Ou relates the symbolism of the rice plants to the significance of rice as a staple crop in Asia, referring to an observation made by Japanese documentary filmmaker Shinsuke Ogawa, who spent years filming in Japan’s countryside: “He once said, ‘The Asian people are people that eat rice’, in other words they are people that have been nourished by rice crops, he very accurately defines ‘Asianness’ through the relationship between people and land, between people and food. The Bishan Commune is an Asian practice of communal living” (30). The images of rice plants, one of Bishan’s primary crops, thus denote the village’s connection to a wider

Figure 3: How to Start Your Own Utopia, 30
conception of Asian cultural identity, one that is rooted in the traditions of agricultural production. Ou’s annotations to Xiaoma+Chengzi’s sketches demonstrate a thorough consideration of the various elements that represent his vision for Bishan, including images that signify the Bishan Commune’s ideology, as well as images that are indicative of place.

The final draft of the emblem is also included on a sketch of proposed passport for the Bishan Commune, which Ou stresses is only intended to function as a marker of identity, and not as an official travel document (31). The final emblem featured in Ou’s notebook is also slightly different from the one currently displayed on the Bishan Commune’s social media pages and other documents related to the Bishan Project. In the most recent emblem, the two books are replaced with one, and the machine gear is absent along with the letters “R+A” (Bishan Commune Facebook page) (Figure 4). The new design includes two pens crossed behind a bushel of grain with the character for “abundance” (豊) emblazoned on it, images that capture the intersection of intellectual and agrarian influences in the Bishan Project, and are also suggestive of Ou’s earlier reference to the pen and plow (Bishan Commune Facebook page). The newer emblem contains more images related to Bishan and its surrounding region, including the village’s Cloud Gate Pagoda, a cluster of Hui-style buildings, an ox, and mulberry plants (another important regional crop) (Bishan Commune Facebook page). It also depicts an electrical transmission tower, perhaps replacing the machine gear as a symbol of progress (Bishan Commune Facebook page). The changes to the emblem omit some of the more ideological aspects of the original sketch, suggesting an effort to make the image more accessible to viewers. The new design also contains more visual references to Bishan, underscoring the significance of locale to the project. The various stages of the emblem’s development present a vivid example of a process to create an image that is symbolic of place. The emblem captures both the tangible
characteristics of Bishan and the ideals that have shaped Ou Ning’s conception of the Bishan Project.

Ou Ning opens the section on the Bishan Commune’s “architectural system” with an overview of his research on architectural visions of the future, featuring examples such as Le Corbusier’s Radiant City, Antonio Sant’Elia’s New City, and Peter Cook and Archigram’s Plug-In City (39). Ou Ning notes that most of these utopian projects are designed for urban areas, highlighting the need for more innovate approaches to rural architecture (39). He describes his approach to architecture in Bishan: “The architecture that the people of Bishan Commune rely on to live in should be designed according to the topography of the village and the demands of agricultural production and cultural life” (39). Ou invites artist and animator Ray Lei to sketch some ideas for architectural projects in Bishan. Ray Lei’s sketches for Bishan include whimsical

![Bishan Commune’s Newest Emblem](image)

Figure 4: Bishan Commune’s Newest Emblem, Bishan Commune Facebook page
designs for a public space, a recreation center, an outdoor tractor drive-in theatre, a small theatre for live performances, and tree house dwellings (40-49). His plans for Bishan’s public space consist of a pavilion-like structure composed of triangular parts supported by poles that can conform to Bishan’s hilly topography, so that “from the sky it appears to be fused together with the terrain” (40) (Figure 5). Ray Lei notes that the triangular components can be reassembled into a variety of forms to serve different purposes; the structure can cover a large expanse of land to shelter public fairs and markets, and can also be assembled into a dome shape and filled with fireflies at night, creating an “agricultural planetarium” (42). Ray Lei returns to the theme of outer space several times in his designs, with a recreation center shaped like a crop circle (44), dwellings that look like spaceships emitting tractor beams (46), and a theatre that resembles both

Figure 5: How to Start Your Own Utopia, 40
a granary and a flying saucer (45). He notes that the representations of a granary and flying saucer bear the respective meanings of “nourishment for the spirit” and “dreams taking flight” (45). Lei’s designs elicit an amused response from Ou Ning: “Heh heh, Ray Lei is always thinking of aliens. Utopias may be a kind of extraterrestrial civilization” (46). While Ray Lei’s illustrations may appear to be more a work of science fiction than a practical scheme for rural architecture, they demonstrate the desire to adopt an innovate approach to the (re)construction of Bishan, fusing aspects of rural life with futuristic design.

While some of the plans revealed in the notebook look towards the future for inspiration, Ou Ning’s impression of Bishan is also grounded in his awareness of the past. He reflects on Bishan’s connection to history with a line from a poem by Li Bai:

“When asked why I reside in the green mountains, I smile and do not answer, my heart is at ease” (问余何事栖碧山，笑而不答心自闲。)

Li Bai, 754 CE

It is difficult to verify whether the “green mountains” (bi shan) of Li Bai’s poem is the Bishan Village of Yi County, Anhui, but whenever I visit this ancient Anhui village, this line of poetry continues to stir my heartstrings. Walking among the village’s historical buildings, with “whitewashed walls and black tiled roofs, row upon row,” beholding the rural scenery of “tall mountains and wide fields, roads like embroidery,” you cannot help but search your memory for verses, as if only the classical Chinese language settled deeply in that period of history can convey your feelings of joy and apprehension. What is upsetting is how we cannot recall those Tang and Song poems that were once read aloud, or can only remember a few words and fragments with no ability to connect them into sentences. Not only does Bishan awaken our desire to live a free and unrestrained
existence, to return to the classical ideal of rural life, it also makes us suddenly feel the
pain of this cultural loss. (24)
In this expressive passage, Ou’s illustrates how Bishan’s historical architecture and bucolic
landscape evoke a sense of history. Ou’s symbolic rendering of Bishan emphasizes this
relationship with history, presenting the village as a place that retains the traces of the past
through which people connect to their cultural heritage.

Another significant symbolic initiative encompassed in the Bishan Project is Ou Ning’s
creation of Bishan Hours, a form of time money currency. Ou Ning based his concept of time-
money currency on Ithaca Hours, a local currency developed by Paul Glover and implemented in
1991 in Ithaca, New York (Paul Glover 56). Ou notes that he visited Ithaca specifically to
investigate its local currency, which is still in operation (personal conversation with Ou Ning,
Zhang Lei and Qian Xiaohua). According to Ou, Bishan Hours would ideally function as an
alternative local economic system in which time spent performing a certain task, such as helping
a local business, could be exchanged for material compensation, such as a meal, book, or object
(personal conversation with Ou Ning, Zhang Lei and Qian Xiaohua). Ou is also interested in
opening a “time bank” and a secondhand store where village residents could bring in unneeded
household appliances to be traded or exchanged for Bishan hours. Ou notes that while he
originally intended Bishan Hours to be used by volunteers coming to the village with little
money, he also hopes that local businesses and village residents will also adopt the system.
While Bishan Hours have not been implemented in the village, they were used by volunteers in
an exhibition at the Taipai Fine Arts Museum in summer 2014, in which Ou presented his plans
for Bishan (Ou, “Bishan jihua zai taibe’’). The paper currency comes in denominations of ten
minutes, fifteen minutes, half an hour, and an hour; as Ou notes, one hour in time money
currency would be the equivalent of roughly fifty yuan (personal conversation with Ou Ning,
Zhang Lei and Qian Xiaohua). The notes display the Bishan Commune’s emblem on one side and various local landmarks on the other, with the exception of the quarter hour note, which depicts the image of Wang Dazhi, the republican-era intellectual from Bishan whose statue Ou and Zuo erected at the entrance of the village (Figure 6). One side of the bill features traditional Chinese characters, with the phrase “Communal life in Bishan (共同生活在碧山)” across the bottom, while the other side uses English, featuring the motto “In Bishan We Trust.” The effort to highlight Bishan’s distinctive characteristics reinforces the role of locality in this initiative.

Although Ou has put much thought into the design and function of Bishan Hours, he is also aware of the obstacles to implementing an alternative currency system in Bishan. As he claims, “The most difficult aspect would be convincing the villagers,” suggesting that Bishan’s residents may not be very receptive to the idea of being paid for their work in a currency other

Figure 6: Bishan Time Money Currency, 15 minute note
than renminbi (private conversation with Ou Ning, Zhang Lei and Qian Xiaohua). Ou also points out that there are potential political and legal risks to creating an alternative currency, although he notes that a currency limited to one village may not be considered a threat (private conversation with Ou Ning, Zhang Lei and Qian Xiaohua). His approach is to “try it first,” and then address any issues that might arise (private conversation with Ou Ning, Zhang Lei and Qian Xiaohua). While the time money currency may not be implemented on any significant scale in Bishan, it represents a symbolic challenge to the economic system that continues to reproduce social and spatial inequalities. Bishan Hours exemplify Ou Ning’s desire to build a community that embraces an alternative model of social and economic relations.

In this section I have attempted to illustrate how activities concerning the imagination contribute to the reconstruction of Bishan as a symbolic place. Ou Ning’s conception of the Bishan Commune as a utopian community, enthusiastically depicted in his notebook, is the product of such activities. Although some of the ideas proposed by Ou have been realized in Bishan, many others remain in the realm of the imagination. For Ou Ning, Bishan offers the potential to experiment with a new form of communal living inspired by the intellectual traditions of ruralism and anarchism. While much of Bishan’s significance as a symbolic place rests on its future possibilities, for Ou Ning, the village is also redolent of a cultural legacy that has largely been forgotten. Ou’s imagining of Bishan is thus informed by his awareness of the past as well as his vision for the future.

In the previous three sections I have attempted to demonstrate how the Bishan Project’s material, visibility-oriented and symbolic activities have contributed to the reconstruction of Bishan as a place. The project’s material practices encompass efforts to reconstruct the physical vestiges of Bishan’s historical legacy. While these initiatives aim to restore architecture that is emblematic of local tradition, they are also intended to create new spaces for cultural exchange,
research, and intellectual growth. Although the project’s architectural practices seem conventional in comparison to Ray Lei’s imaginative designs, plans for the School of Tillers also reveal Ou’s desire to incorporate more innovative elements into the Bishan Project’s material endeavors. The activities related to visibility associated with the Bishan Project have attempted to address the cultural hegemony of urban areas by asserting the historical and cultural value of Bishan and other villages in Yi County. While the Bishan Project’s material and visibility-oriented practices intend to shape how the village is experienced and perceived, its symbolic activities reveal how Bishan is imagined according to Ou’s utopian vision. For Ou Ning, Bishan symbolizes the possibility of a lived alternative to the social and economic conditions that continue to reproduce China’s urban-rural hierarchy. Though some of Ou Ning’s ideas may never be fully realized in Bishan, they nevertheless represent a challenge to the prevailing narrative of “modernization” with its emphasis on capital accumulation and urbanization. The Bishan Project’s approach to place reconstruction thus fuses the Heideggerian values of particularity with the universality of the objectives expressed by Marx. On one hand, Ou and Zuo emphasize the particularity of Bishan and other villages in Yi County by attempting to make aspects of their local cultures visible. On the other hand, the Bishan Project is inspired by ideologies offering a universal alternative to the conditions of global capital that continue to reproduce spatial inequality.
SECTION VI: CRITICISM

While my analysis so far has focused on the Bishan Project as a place construction initiative, I also wish to discuss some of the criticism that the project has received. As a public project initiated by individuals who are well known within China’s artistic and intellectual circles, the Bishan Project has generated a significant amount of attention in both conventional and social media outlets. In July 2014, a Harvard PhD candidate named Zhou Yun published an outspoken critique of the Bishan Project online, prompting widespread discussion and debate on Chinese social media websites (Li Cheng). Zhou Yun, who is earning her PhD in sociology, attended a talk given by Ou Ning in Bishan to participants in a summer research session organized by Nanjing University’s Social Sciences Department (Ou, quoted by Chen). In the talk, which I also attended, Ou Ning outlined the broad range of intellectual works and practical experiments that have inspired his conception of the Bishan Project and also summarized the project’s activities to date (presentation). He discussed some of the challenges of social engineering in contemporary China and described his own vision of “practical utopianism,” based on self-government and consensus decision-making (presentation). On July 3, 2014, Zhou Yun posted a response to the talk online, titled “Whose Village? Whose Commune?” In the essay, Zhou condemns the “elitism” of the project and argues that it contributes to the “othering” of village residents. The opening section of her essay introduces her main points of critique relating to the Bishan Project:

I am calling the Bishan Project into question because its founder wants to create the “Bishan Commune,” and speaks of “villagers’ autonomy and self-governance;” however, the PowerPoint presentation he uses to introduce his ideas is completely in English, and full of big words such as civil society, social engineering and party politics², with constant allusions

² Italicized words were originally written in English
to Western works such as *Walden*, *Skinner*, and *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*; he also
deliberately emphasizes that the notebook used to record his vision was a *Moleskine*. In this
discussion, all of the details and *Status Symbol[s]* continuously produce a cultural divide,
placing real villagers on the outside. In fact, it is not just villagers who are excluded, urban
residents who lack cultural capital are excluded as well. Therefore, with regard to the
“Commune,” whose “Commune” is it?
The aesthetics of the “Bishan Project” are extremely elitist, attempting to appeal to middle-
class intellectual tastes, like leaving the clamour of the city to admire “rapeseed flowers in
bloom.” …Villagers want to open small stores, fix the roads, to develop tourism and earn an
income from selling entry tickets, yet intellectuals do not approve of any of this, one could
even say they think it is beneath them (of course, like the Librarie Avant-Garde, a single
leather-bound notebook is 108 yuan). In considering intellectuals who come to the
countryside to seek their own Shangri-La, there is no need to judge individuals choosing their
own paths in life, but once it becomes a “project,” the process turns the imagining of the
countryside into a form of *Othering*, which can even be compared to the Western gaze on
“the East.” Ultimately, there are ethical issues behind “Rural Reconstruction”—the
countryside is whose countryside? Who should decide the direction of villages’ development?
However, a cautious consideration of the ethics of Rural Reconstruction is completely absent
in this discussion. (Zhou)

In the first paragraph, Zhou highlights the position of intellectual privilege that Ou Ning occupies
in the discussion of how to address problems faced by China’s rural communities. Her emphasis
on Ou’s use of “big words” as well as his numerous references to Western texts suggests that the
concepts that form the project’s theoretical foundation are inaccessible to individuals who have
not been exposed to academic theories or a “Western” cultural education. Zhou argues that much
of Ou’s discussion reinforces the “cultural divide” between the Bishan Project’s founders and village residents, leading her to question the inclusiveness of a rural commune formed under these divisive conditions. Zhou proceeds to argue that the Bishan Project exhibits a bucolic aesthetic that is removed from the realities of rural life and the material needs of village residents. According to Zhou, Ou’s effort to influence Bishan’s conditions through this project turns the rural into the “other,” reinforcing Ou and his colleagues’ position of authority in shaping the development of rural areas. By asking “Whose countryside?” Zhou challenges the absence of villagers’ voices in the Bishan Project, and calls for more reflection on the role of intellectuals and outsiders in determining the future of China’s countryside.

In Ou Ning’s response to Zhou Yun’s critique, he argued that she had taken many of his comments out of context (Ou, “Huiying @yiyinqingxia”). He noted, for example, that he only mentioned the brand of his notebook in passing, and explained that he was given the book when Moleskine invited him to participate in an exhibition (Ou, “Huiying to @yiyinqingxia”). At the time, he was thinking about how to launch the Bishan Project, and decided to use the opportunity to record his ideas for Bishan (Ou, “Huiying @yiyinqingxia”). In a personal interview, Ou Ning comments that he has no objection to villagers starting their own businesses or improving village infrastructure (personal interview). While Ou believes it is reasonable for Bishan’s residents to want to improve the village’s economy, he also points out that, as he is not involved in business, his ability to impact the village’s economy is limited (personal interview). In his online response, Ou also emphasizes his awareness of the social concerns raised by Zhou:

Do not think you are the only one that acknowledges the agency of villages, that only people who study sociology can be aware of [social] boundaries, or that we are fools who only know how to show off our middle-class tastes and seek praise. I have discussed many of the points you mentioned before and am fed up with discussion, so I have
decided to act instead. To take action does not mean that I can simply expect to be praised, living in the countryside and working on the Bishan Project does not give me an inherent sense of moral superiority, I am making my best effort, perhaps my ideas are too ambitious, and perhaps my individual capabilities and the realistic possibilities for the project are limited, but I am trying my best. Failure is not shameful thing. Intellectuals are not some sort of mighty force, and local people are not as bitter and resentful as you imagine, every person has flaws, and to live together in the same place is already not easy.

(Ou, “Huiying @yiyinqingxia”)

Here Ou emphasizes his desire to take an active approach despite the limitations he faces in implementing the Bishan Project. In a personal interview, Ou Ning states that after the Bishan Harvestival was shut down in 2012, he was too nervous to do anything in the village for about a year (personal interview). The activities of the Bishan Project are therefore constantly being negotiated in terms of the political realities of contemporary China. Considering Zhou’s critique, Ou Ning offers his own answer to her title question: “Whose village really is this? It’s not my village, it’s not the villagers’ village; it’s the Party’s village” (personal interview).

While Ou Ning is frustrated that Zhou Yun’s critique does not consider the external factors that limit the Bishan Project, he also notes that the concerns she voices over the “cultural divide” between rural residents and the project’s implementers are valid (personal interview). He acknowledges that his approach is not easily accessible or understandable for many of Bishan’s residents, but states that he is also trying his best to cooperate with villagers and eliminate “compartmentalization” (personal interview). However, some villagers have argued that the Bishan Project is still largely irrelevant to the majority of village residents. One younger resident estimated that approximately eighty percent of the village’s population was unaware of the Bishan Project, and argued that the advanced age of most villagers made it difficult for them to
understand Ou and Zuo’s efforts in Bishan (informal conversation on July 9[2]). Another resident criticized the project’s distance from the daily lives of most villagers, stating that the project does not seem to have any immediate plan for the local population (informal conversation on July 2). In light of these statements, Zhou’s critique of the Bishan Project’s lack of accessibility to local residents becomes relevant. At the same time, Zhou’s essay reveals an incomplete understanding of both the limitations faced by Ou and Zuo, as well as their desire to address the rural-urban “cultural divide” that Zhou herself observes during Ou’s presentation. In fact, I believe that Ou and Zuo’s place construction efforts are an attempt to address the cultural hierarchy that reproduces the rural as the “other.” As a cultural project, their efforts are frequently misunderstood by villagers and outsiders alike. Ou Ning’s comments reveal his awareness of the weaknesses of the Bishan Project and his desire to rectify them indicates that there is still potential for the project to evolve. Moving forward, Ou and Zuo are charged with the task of making their project accessible to a wider audience and seeking ways to reconcile their vision for Bishan with the aspirations of its residents.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate how the Bishan Project endeavors to address contemporary China’s rural-urban inequality through place construction. As Ou Ning’s essays and speeches reveal, the Bishan Project operates as a critique of the rapid urbanization produced by China’s marketization and integration with the global economic system. The Bishan Project can therefore be conceived of as an effort to reconstruct rural places in response to the forces of global capital that not only lead to the economic decline of rural areas but also undermine the value of local knowledge and culture. As artists and intellectuals, Ou and Zuo’s efforts to engage with the countryside are based primarily on cultural production. This has led to criticism of the project’s cultural distance from the majority of rural residents as well as its failure to improve the material conditions of Bishan’s villagers. However, Ou’s Ning’s self-reflection and his desire to continue to move forward with the project suggest that the Bishan will continue to symbolize the hope for a different future.
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