

## **UCIL22602: WRITTEN ASSESSMENT TWO**

### ***How can Chinese rural village culture be preserved in a time of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation?***

#### ***Introduction***

There is a dynamic and often contradicting interplay between China as a deeply traditional country aware of its past, and its rapid industrialisation and exponential urbanisation. There are over a hundred Chinese cities with populations of at least a million, all of which are larger than ten European *countries* (Routley, 2020). Cities exist as an absence of space between individuals, space that in rural areas represents peace and subsistence is made dense through activity and consumption. The fast pace of life and economic turbulence of cities are profound challenges to traditional cultures which depend on a sense of stability and reverence to history. So as urban environments sprawl further and consume at an even faster pace, what can be done to preserve the cultural traditions of rural Chinese villages? In order to answer this question, the cause-effect relationship must be considered highlighting the particular issues of rural-urban migration and how cultural and environmental sustainability are fundamentally interlinked. In terms of China's future trajectory, this is a vital challenge to meet if economic growth is to be maintained sustainably and if China is to preserve the cultures and traditions upon which many of its successes were founded.

#### ***Summary of the documentary*** (Xu, 2017).

The documentary '*Dai's Garden*' focuses on these issues with the slow-food movement pioneer Dai Jianjun who is committed to upholding traditional Chinese village culture in this age of urbanisation and industrialisation. The documentary outlines the story behind his expensive farm-to-table restaurant in the city of Hangzhou which generates around \$400,000 per year for Dai who uses this money to fund a 'green utopia' in a remote village in Suichang County with the aim of allowing workers to stay and not migrate to the cities. A central theme of the documentary is a critique of urbanised life in China with a particular impact that this has on food standards, sustainability and health. In describing how he has set up his restaurant he reinforces that the "best ingredients come from the villages" and that in the cities, a much shorter cycle of growth leads to higher levels of processing in food production making it far more unhealthy. When you eat at Dai's restaurant the idea is that you are not only consuming food but also consuming culture, surroundings, atmosphere and senses, an idea that is much less appreciated in the city. There is a reference to how the expansion of the city is putting pressures on distinct ingredients that are specific to a certain area such as Lin Ginger.

We are then taken into rural China to Yellow Earth Mountain in Suichang County, the poorest village in Zhejiang province where Dai Jianjun is setting up his 'green utopia'. This

area has a 4000 year history of agriculture and so long as the extra effort and time is put into the process there is no need for chemical fertilisers or pesticides and traditional farming methods can remain. Dai's aim is for farmers to be able to stay in rural areas such as these and not be drawn into the big cities as migrant labourers. He recognises the importance of a sense of belonging but knows action needs to be taken to reduce rural to urban migration. Access to medical care and education is shown as crucial as these are essentials that will keep people in the village and encourage further investment. Dai hopes that the children currently attending the non-profit academy he is funding will stay in and around the village or return at some point in their lives to maintain and improve the village further.

### ***Personal reflections***

As someone who grew up in a more rural area of the UK and is currently living in a larger city I find this is a very compelling narrative. Many of my childhood friends were from farming backgrounds and despite there clearly being huge differences in scale and context between my situation and the documentary I recognise similarities. I was particularly drawn in by the sense portrayed in the documentary that the traditions of rural life can be seen as unnecessary quirks compared to the ruthless efficiencies that dominate urban dwelling. In reality, no matter where you are in the world farming communities remain absolutely essential. I often get the sense that urban hinterlands and rural communities are often seen as 'the periphery' in contrast to cities which represent a goal or a point of destination. The necessity of rural-urban migration reinforces this and I agree with Dai Jianjun that we should challenge and rectify this where possible.

My previous assumptions of attitudes towards non-profit initiatives was challenged throughout the documentary. Dai outlines how people in rural areas don't fully understand why he is so committed to this cause despite it not making him money. Some of my previous experience travelling through developing Asian countries such as Nepal and Vietnam gave me an indication that people in rural communities were less concerned about financial reward compared to those in the city, in fact it was often very challenging to get people to accept payment for the hospitality I received. I was therefore slightly surprised when Dai explains how what he is doing is much better understood by people in the city compared to the reception he gets in the village he is actually helping.

### ***Relevance***

The central issue of relevance raised in the documentary is how to mitigate the cultural loss caused through excessive rural to urban migration. In mainstream discussion, the 'brain drain' caused by young people moving away from the area and rarely, if ever, returning is seen as primarily an economic issue but it also represents a constant ebbing away of long standing cultural traditions as rural populations age and decline. The documentary certainly brought this into sharp focus with the importance that Dai Jianjun places on the children

currently studying at his academy. Preserving cultural traditions is intrinsically linked to issues of sustainability and industrial consumption is rejected in favour of local produce and subsistence farming.

### ***Towards a solution?***

In answering the question of how Chinese rural village culture can be preserved in a time of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation we must resolve the conflict between tradition and capitalism and address the underlying contradictions in China's economic model. French philosopher Émile Durkheim offered a critique of capitalism by distilling its psychological costs as (1) overarching individualism, (2) excessive hope, (3) too much freedom, (4) atheism, and (5) a weakening of the nation and of the family, all of which ultimately lead people to unhappiness (Jones, 1987). The thesis of the documentary is much the same, if people become disconnected from their roots and get too caught up in the fast pace of city life then they will not think to return to their villages and consequently will lose a sense of belonging. The rising wealth of individuals in Chinese cities is supercharging the consumption of luxury goods and changing travel habits (Gries, 2023) but an emerging trend also shows how young people are chasing wealth not for material purposes but in order to escape the 'capitalist rat race' (Shuyan, 2021). This represents somewhat of a contradiction but it does highlight a desire for 'something more' than material wealth.

Dai Jianjun's expensive restaurant earns him significant sums but he is not driven by capital accumulation or material desires; he seeks to use it for what he sees as a greater purpose. China's state capitalist model (or socialism with Chinese characteristics as labelled by the CCP), is accepting of capital accumulation and the use of market mechanisms as long as they benefit the nation not simply the individual (Gries, 2023a). Dai views maintaining rural village culture as beneficial to the nation as a whole and is passionate that other people with wealth should be doing the same, he says that even if one child returns to help the village when they're older it will have been a success and even if non do, he will know that he tried his best (Xu, 2017).

The household registration or *hukou* system "ties people to the places they ... or ... their parents were born" (Morris, 2023) effectively criminalising migrant labourers which means big cities benefit from a cheap labour source but spend very little on them in return. This underlines the importance of maintaining vibrant and livable villages so people are not forced out. Development interventions such as medical facilities and education in rural areas can make the villages more likely to retain their populations (Shamshad, 2012), but this is not adequate on its own. If cultural preservation is to come out on top against considerations of marginal economic benefit then a strong sense of emotional attachment needs to be retained between the individual and their sense of place.

Developing a strong sense of *place attachment* depends on place identity, dependence, nature bonding, family bonding, and friend bonding (Raymond, Brown and Weber, 2010). For this feeling of attachment to override the draws of urbanisation it must be deeply embedded

which makes a cultural education and strong family ties from an early age of particular importance if Chinese rural village culture is to be preserved.

### ***Conclusions***

For me, the documentary highlighted the fundamental importance of forming intergenerational bonds based on shared histories that can help counterbalance the prevailing sense of enforced change. I'm sure most people agree that it is not desirable for cultures to be swept aside with little thought by the forces of urbanisation and industrialisation, but ensuring this doesn't happen requires action. This is a shared issue globally but the solution has to be embedded in local initiatives such as the non-profit academy set up by Dai Jianjun. Resolving this problem will put China on a much more stable footing going forward as the rural-urban relationship is stabilised and people are allowed to feel much more confident in their own sense of place.

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