

# **Understanding the Rise of China Blog: Dai's Garden**

**Inequality, urbanisation, consumption, traditional culture, food safety & security**

## **How does urbanisation erode rural culture in China?**

### **Introduction**

China's economic success is largely due to state orchestrated immense urban expansion since the 'opening up' of China under Deng. Consequently, cities have become economic clusters and nodules in the flow of capital through China (Harvey, 2019). The agglomeration of economic activities in cities has benefited China's economy in the global market, however it has also created widespread spatial inequalities within the country that is driving a change in population distribution in which rural communities and their culture are eroding. This blog recounts a documentary, 'Dai's Garden', exploring the complexities and consequences of urbanisation on Chinese culture. Could the urbanisation that has propelled China as a global power also be weakening its integrity from within?

### **Summary of documentary**

The documentary follows Dai Jianjin, a former Chinese employee of the government, who decided to quit his job and use his wealth to combine his passion for food and gardening into a restaurant. The Manor was created to share Dai's joy of traditional food from rural provinces and has been active since 2004. The restaurant sources food from and supports a rural village 200 miles away. Wealthy people come to the attraction paying approximately \$180 per person per meal, the profit is reinvested into The Yellow Earth Village in Suichang. Dai says the purpose is to be able to economically sustain the village that would otherwise be lost as a result of rural to urban migration, the restaurant gives the village a footing in the market that enables economic viability in staying within the village. Dai could see how the industrious urbanisation of modern China has been eroding rural culture, a culture characterised by a symbiotic human and environmental relationship, that if lost will decrease human connectedness with nature outside of the 'concrete jungle'. To help invigorate the rural culture, Dai has created a non-profit academy for students to learn, regardless of their background, about China, Confucian ideals, and the importance of rural life. He hopes that through the academy an intergenerational wish to sustain rural culture will provide the village with longevity despite urban expansion. He believes that if the students love the village and nature, they will want to protect it. For Dai, if just one of his students returns later in life to aid and conserve the rural life in the village, he will have 'succeeded in his life'.

### **Personal Reactions**

A main theme of the documentary is the contrast of urban and rural life reflecting and questioning human nature, the contesting desire for peace, and the desire of material growth. Within the documentary we are witnessed to juxtaposed imagery of the busy city and still shots of the quaint rural village and restaurant garden, this dynamic allows the viewer to take a step back and picture themselves within both scenes, providing a personal emotive experience to which the city feels unnatural and the rural life tranquil. Through this dynamic, the documentary poses to question why we are so willing to live fast paced urban lives, and questions where our humanist principles lie. Does intrinsic value lie in an urban environment of synthetic culture, or does it belong to community and nature? Personally, it resonates with my feelings having lived in Manchester following a rural upbringing in Devon. There is more opportunity in the city life if driven by monetary values, but at what cost? Should a balance be actively maintained? Or should the approach to how we perceive and realise both urban and rural spheres and what we value be reassessed? These are questions that seem vital to the way China is currently governed and integral to its future. Will a loss of rural Chinese culture cause a loss in identity that creates the values, beliefs and aspirations of the nation state and its inhabitants? How might this loss impact China's development and future integrity? By asking such questions one can reflect on complexities of rapid urbanisation and further understand where value lies.

What particularly stood out to me within the documentary is when we are witness to a dinner between wealthy customers at The Manor. The waitress and menu explain the different elements of the food describing the duck as 'sliver plume with gold cicada', to which the customer responds in a nonchalant tone, 'what a fancy name, but it is just a duck' followed by laughter around the table. To me, although this interaction is seemingly innocent, it represents an aspect of urban economic development that is disturbing. An ignorant disconnect from urbanised individuals and nature, highlighting the significance of retraining rural culture.

### **Relevance**

The documentary raised the contending yet interconnected nature of human culture, urban development, rural longevity, and sustainable environmental values, whilst revealing the imbalances that intense urbanisation and urban migration can create within China and the effect that this has on China's culture. As a viewer, the documentary subliminally highlighted the dystopian aspect of a consumer society perpetuated by urbanisation enabling me to reflect on my actions as a consumer, questioning why we chose to purchase certain things in excess and whether doing so actually holds any value. I have come to develop a perspective that core cultural values are important towards a society's future development, history is important and rural culture survives by passing on its history

through generations, when generations migrate and move livelihoods this part of societal culture can be eroded. Furthermore, the conservation of the environment is fundamental to core values, and it can be seen in China and elsewhere in the world that urbanisation can negatively alter the environment.

### **Answer**

Urbanisation has eroded rural culture in China through a change in the relationship between individuals and nature exacerbating a complete disconnect between the humans, animals, and nature. The duck in the restaurant is seen as just another commodity by the wealthy patrons rather than a once living organism. This disconnect between humanity and nature is commonplace in urban environments throughout the world including the UK as people don't really think about what they are eating whether it be supermarket or restaurant food turning the biotic duck into an abiotic commodity, a true product of urbanisation and its accompanying consumerism (Atkinson, 2014). This is reaffirmed when Dai talks about processed food in China, 'In cities, meat may not be meat, vegetables may not be vegetables, thus people are less human'. I believe this reflects the threat of urbanisation and the accompanying lifestyle eroding important rural culture that connects humans to the natural world, without which the natural environment is not actively conserved, creating both foreseeable and unforeseeable unsustainable consequences. Furthermore, it contradicts Chinese values of Confucianism and the aspiration for 'tianren heyi' as a core philosophical value (Yao, 2014). Tianren heyi refers to the harmony between nature and humanity and that there is a practical value as well as a metaphysical value in protecting the environment (Yao, 2014). This ethos has helped inform environmental philosophy in both the East and West. Current urbanisation in China ignores this principle, and prioritises other materialist values. The CCP seem to pick and choose what Confucian values they want instilled in the population to legitimise Xi Jinping's rule, relying on invoking traditional Confucian values of the nuclear family and state (Peter Gries, 2023), but disregarding that of the environment. This demonstrates an erosion of culture as Confucian ideals are embedded in Chinese culture, when such ideals are ignored, the cultural morals and values will inevitably erode/shift. Coupled with the growing rural to urban migration, loss of core cultural values such as 'tianren heyi' may lead to a dysfunctional relationship between humans and the environment within China that will impact its rise, but also the rest of the world as global environmental challenges from anthropogenic climate change to biodiversity extinctions are borderless (IPCC, 2022). China must play a large role in environmental protection, mitigation and conservation and cooperate with other nations for issues like the climate crisis to be solved (Wallace-Wells, 2022). All environmental issues need to be addressed by societies who value their environment and are not inclined to exploit it. A culture that does not inherently value the

environment will inevitably encounter problems in its future development as the environment is a limiting factor to growth (Meadows, 1972).

The solution to the erosion of rural culture is to reduce rural to urban migration so that the communities continue, and the culture is passed on through generations. Regional micro-level inequality must be addressed in China as it is driving individuals to move to cities for work. 'Since 1980, over half a billion Chinese have moved from the countryside to a city', all of which would have been part of rural communities and have had families to continue the culture (Gries, 2023). Reducing inequalities would require economic incentives to stay in rural regions, such as Dai's restaurant business model creating employment opportunities in The Yellow Earth Village. Furthermore, increasing investment in education in rural areas industry can shift to create opportunities in rural areas beyond agriculture.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the impacts of urbanisation are complex, it is evident that rural culture is being eroded by urbanisation, consumerism and the spatial inequalities that drive internal migration. Sustaining a rural culture is important to China's future development as it allows a societal focus on nature and values that are not materialistic, philosophically grounding the nation in an identity. The documentary Dai's Garden helps to convey cultural losses to urbanisation and the importance of retaining positive historical values. If the CCP fail to recognise the importance of the rural community and environment there will likely be further ecological, spiritual, and cultural issues conceived that could undermine China's rise in a globalising world.

**Word Count: 1623**

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