

The Tea Gardens of Dazhangshan

International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens 2019

30th edition

edited by
Patrizia Boschiero, Luigi Latini,
Maurizio Paolillo

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1. Sixi 思溪村, Sikou, Wuyuan county, December 2018. The village of Sixi, 19 kilometres north-west of Wuyuan County, lies between the Jinfeng Xiu Ling 锦峰绣岭 promontories and the river Qingxi Bi He 清溪碧河. Founded during the Southern Song dynasty (1199 AD), Sixi boasts numerous buildings from the Ming and Qing periods with features typical of the traditional

residences of the historic Huizhou prefecture. In 2013, the village was included in the national register of traditional villages (*Zhongguo chuantong cunluo* 中国传统村落) and the following year it was entered into the national list of historic and cultural villages (*Zhongguo lishi wenhua ming cun* 中国历史文化名村). Sixi, along with Mount Dazhangshan and various other villages and sites,

belongs to the Wuyuan scenic area, classified as level 4A by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (the maximum rating is 5A for major national monuments). Non-residents must pay for an entry ticket to visit the area. The village has been used as a filming location for a number of national television series (in 1987 and in 2006) which has increased its fame among Chinese tourists.

ANNA-PAOLA POLA

“The Most Beautiful Village in China.”

Heritage, politics, and transformations in rural China

“Of ten parts, eight and half is mountains, one more for fields, half remains the water ways and half again estates.”¹ The laconic phrase used by locals to describe Wuyuan county does not do justice to the rich landscape of this area: a hilly-mountainous region, rich in rivers, trees and tea plantations, enclosed between the mountains of Dazhangshan, the World Heritage Site Huangshan (the Yellow Mountain), and Sanqingshan, the sacred mountain of Daoism, also a world heritage site.

Over centuries, the location and morphology of this region were closely bound up with the characteristics of the historic settlements and the lives of the inhabitants to the extent that the architectural style of the buildings and the former profession of the local family heads were both traditionally described using the name of the geographical area to which they belonged: Huizhou, the ancient prefecture comprising Wuyuan and the other counties on the boundary between the Anhui and Jiangxi provinces.

Since the inauguration of the railway station in 2015, it has become much easier to reach Wuyuan. Regular fast trains travel from Shanghai to Wuyuan in just over three hours.² Visitors can then continue their journeys via a new and continuously expanding network of roads overlooked by building sites, small houses under construction, new districts with small detached houses, second homes, and tourist villages planned for a rapidly growing middle class.

Whatever the type or scale of construction, all new buildings share similar decorative schemes. White plaster, stepped walls, and dark tiled roofs are all taken from a building handbook that was drawn up and imposed to maintain a uniform architectural appearance throughout the region, a unique identity that remains unchanged despite the transformations taking place throughout the county.

Off the main roads, concealed between the folds of promontories are hundreds of historic villages, tiny and compact, built in the narrow flat strips beside the watercourses. Most of the buildings in these settlements date to the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) periods, but the underlying urban structure is far older, with a rich, well-preserved architectural heritage that has remained relatively unknown until more recent times and that is now being reproduced and mimicked in the sites where the new houses are being built.

Travelling merchants

From the foundation of the People's Republic (1949) right up to recent decades of intense urban development, mountain villages continued to play a marginal role and were therefore left relatively untouched by change. But this was not always the case. The villages of Huizhou owe their ancient wealth to the communication links provided by a dense network of naviga-

1. “Ba fen banshan yi fen tian, banfen shuilu he zhuangyuan 八分半山一分田,半分水路和庄园”, People's Government of Wuyuan County, www.jxwy.gov.cn.

2. Wuyuan is on the Beijing-Fuzhou high speed train line officially opened in June 2015, www.jxwy.gov.cn.



2

2. Sixi 思溪村, Sikou, Wuyuan county, December 2018. A small Huizhou-style residence in the village of Sixi. The houses have a small footprint and two or three floors. The exteriors feature high white-washed brick walls with slit-like windows and doorways with overhanging roofs (*menzhao* 门罩). Dark coping tiles emphasize the unusual stepped lines of these so-called 'horse-head walls' (*matouqiang* 马头墙).

ble watercourses and, indirectly, to the lack of arable land, two characteristics that caused the local population to engage in long-distance trade.

The abundance of trees – especially firs – on these promontories supplied the timber trade that remained a major source of income in Wuyuan county until the end of the Qing dynasty.³ When Hangzhou⁴, which lay 200 kilometres to the east, became the capital of the Song dynasty (1127-1279), the merchants of Huizhou supplied wood for the city's new mansions, transporting the timber along a system of tributaries descending from the local mountains to the Xin'an River, which flowed to the capital and onwards to the other rich cities in the Jiangnan region, along the shallow estuary of the Yangtze River.

Timber was flanked by a trade in tea whose precious leaves found a suitable climate and terrain on the mountains of the region, again transforming a potential drawback – the mountain – into a strong point. Local merchants not only turned the region into one of China's leading tea producing areas but also into a strategic handling and distribution centre.⁵ Halfway through the Ming period, they expanded into the salt trade, this time relying on their commercial skills rather than the presence of a local resource. During the Qing period, many merchants established pawnbroking activities, which represented another profitable way to invest the income from their trading activities.

The Huizhou "travelling merchants" or *keshang* 客商 visited the rich cultural centres in the lower reaches of the Yangtze where they learned to appreciate the finer aspects of this culture, investing their profits to educate their most promising sons back home. As a result Huizhou became one of the regions with the highest number of candidates successfully passing the strict exams of the imperial bureaucracy. In China at that time, the power and prestige of state officers was the highest aspiration for anyone who could dedicate the time and resources to their studies. The lustre of this success would not only reflect on their immediate family but also on their clan, their family line, and on all their descendants. The importance of these cultural and literary environments inspired the merchants of Huizhou to begin producing and trading in sophisticated tools for calligraphy known as *wen fang si bao* 文房四宝, the "four treasures of the study": paper, ink brush, inkstick and inkstone.

Historic heritage

Rural settlements also benefited from the investments made by their merchants in public facilities like schools, academies (*shuyuan* 书院), commemorative halls, bridges and roads, but where the economic and cultural prowess of family heads truly came to the fore was in the private residences that they built for the family remaining in their villages of origin and for their retirement in old age.

The external appearance of these buildings was austere due to regulations limiting the decorations permissible.⁶ The surfaces of their white-

3. YANG 1988, p. 137.

4. Hangzhou 杭州 is the modern name of the ancient capital of the Southern Song dynasty, Lin'an 临安 (1127–1276).

5. Wuyuan still has the title *Quanguo zhongdian chan cha xian* 全国重点产茶县 (key county for national tea production), www.jxwy.gov.cn.

6. KNAPP 1992, p. 124.

washed walls were interrupted only by occasional apertures more like embrasures than windows. The stepped 'horse-head wall,' or *matouqiang* 马头墙, concealed the slope of the slanting roof and was crowned by dark coping tiles contrasting with the white walls beneath, a distinctive feature of Huizhou architecture. The high walls surrounding the residence acted as fire-walls protecting the wooden load-bearing structure as well as guaranteeing the safety of the family members – women, children and the elderly – left alone while their husbands and brothers travelled. The buildings, which usually consisted of two or three residential storeys on a relatively small plot of land, had a deliberately small footprint to avoid consuming arable land, which is very scarce in this region.

Only the entrance with its finely sculpted brick and stone canopy or *menzhao* 门罩 gave a hint of the richness of the interiors. Once guests crossed the threshold they would find themselves surrounded by elaborate decorations made of wood, stone and brick – “the three carvings of Huizhou” (*huizhou sandiao* 徽州三雕) – confirming the skill of the local artisans. Beams, parapets, and roof brackets were all covered in high-relief scenes; the stone bases under the wooden columns featured carved plant decorations; internal doors and windows had latticework or finely pierced panels to allow air and light to pass. The characteristic skywells or *tianjing* 天井 were singular open spaces that were both internal and external to allow rain, air and light to enter the building. Above they were open to the sky and below was a stone pavement with a cistern for rain collection (*si shui gui tang* 四水归堂) connected to a drainage system channelling excess water into conduits outside the building. These narrow channels, private water gardens, wells and public pools structured the village's open spaces.

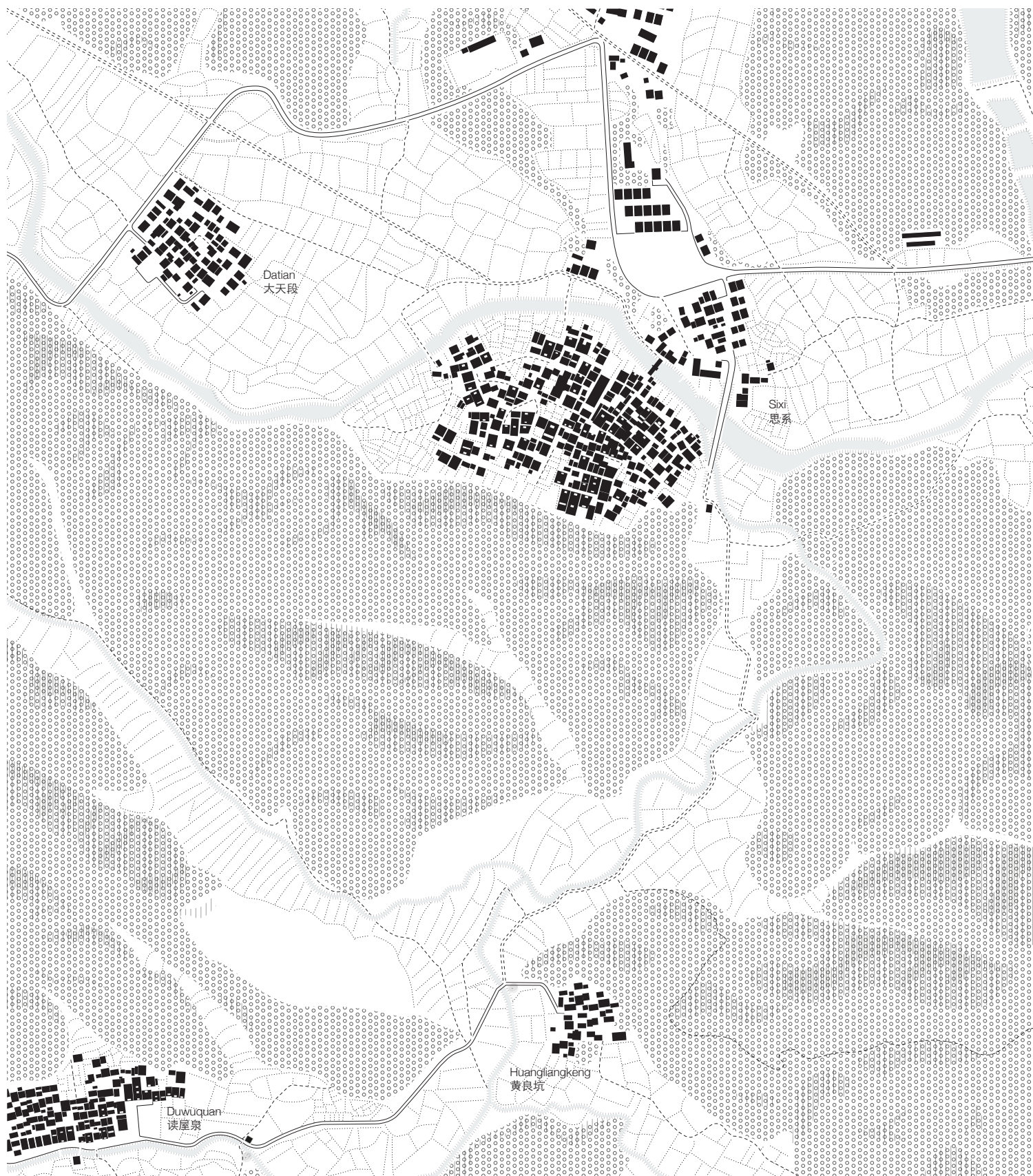
The various dwellings were contained within narrow stone alleys and organized in tiny hamlets, usually associated with a single family group. The planning of the settlement cluster was regulated by the principles of *fengshui* 风水, which had one of its most important schools of thought in this region and tended to choose sites at the foot of a hill and overlooking watercourses or pools.

The surrounding landscape is bounded by woody hills and mountains where tea plantations grow on relatively small plots of land. In the past, the management of the land and of its timber resources, which were so important for the local economy, was regulated by a complex network of ownership agreements that benefitted from a highly dynamic market governed by a business logic rather than traditional agro-forestry practices. For example, the possibility of selling shares during the growth phase of the trees allowed credit and cash to circulate for a product that had yet to mature.⁷

The hamlets are very close to each other and it is possible to visit several villages in one day merely following the water and walking along the paths between the rice fields planted on the hilly slopes.

The old maps of the area contained in the county's historic gazettes provide a detailed picture of the territory, indicating bridges, post stations,

7. McDERMOTT 2014, pp. 372-373.





Topographical map of a tract of rural landscape in Wuyuan county showing the villages of Datian, Sixi, Yancun, Duwuquan, and Huangliangken, surrounding woods, and pattern of fields (map prepared by Anna-Pola Pola, 2019).

-  buildings
-  greenhouses
-  vegetable gardens
-  fields
-  wood
-  shaded relief
-  paved road
-  country road
-  path
-  river
-  water
-  bank
- isolated tree

3-4. Sixi 思溪村, Sikou, Wuyuan county, December 2018. The houses in the village overlook narrow alleyways paved with limestone. The water management system is present in the open spaces with small canals, wells and ponds.



3

military garrisons, navigability of rivers in addition to names of mountains, rivers, and villages. The merchants themselves played an active role in maintaining and improving the regional landscape and its infrastructures for ease of travel back to their home villages. The postal service meant they could communicate, even from long distances, with their families still at home, making these places far more cosmopolitan than might appear at first glance.

The rural Renaissance

In 2000, two settlements in the ancient prefecture of Huizhou, Xidi and Hongcun, were declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. It was a watershed moment, the first time that the historical and cultural value of a village had been recognized at this level in China.

The focus on minor settlements has complex motivations. The need for economic development, the hope of improving people's livelihoods, the promotion of tourism, the rediscovery of historic heritage and of local and national identities all overlap, continuously redefining contents and objectives.

In the early 2000s, after more than a decade of economic reform and radical urban development, the government was becoming increasingly concerned about increasing discontent due to the gap between rural and urban areas known as 'the three rural issues' or *san nong wenti* 三农问题: agriculture, villages, and farmers. Since then, numerous measures have been introduced to help close this gap.

The Chinese model of development is closely tied to the urbanization process. The measures to address the imbalance include planning strategies implemented through planning tools to facilitate the construction of infrastructures and essential services (roads, water, gas, electricity, sewers...), the



4

縣境東西廣二百二十里南北袤一百五十里 東至大
 鵬嶺凹頭抵開化界一百一十里自界至開化縣八十里
 西至本縣澆嶺抵浮梁縣界九十里自界至浮梁縣六
 十五里 南至銀港抵德興界三十五里自界至德興縣

舊志縣境異同

乾隆志註云舊志山川鄉都分爲兩圖然山阜之脈絡
 未清川流之分合未晰鄉都雖有處所村落未列輿圖
 其間失真者頗多今當別爲訂定委邑疆域南北較狹
 東西較廣茲圖雖并合山川鄉都南北如紙幅展其東
 西以便於布置雖本形不如此廣以長方爲展者觀之
 猶之正方爲圓也圖有山脈有水道有衢路津梁有營
 汛舖遞村落不能悉載有山脈有水道有衢路津梁有營
 能盡真參合見聞聊存梗槩披圖一覽星源區域約
 目矣在

婺源縣志

卷二

疆域一

圖考

雲川文學
 王在文繪



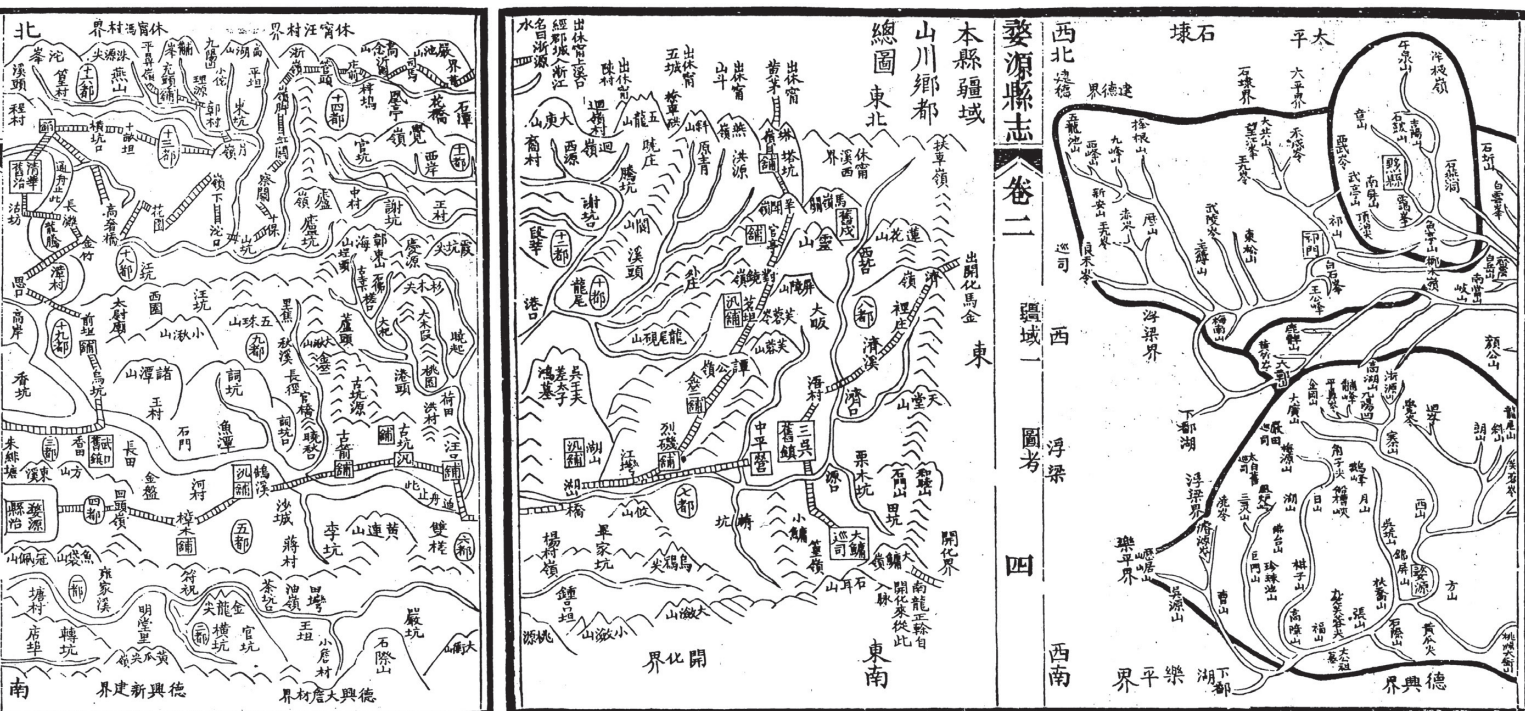
improvement of the welfare offer (schools, clinics, post offices...), the agglomeration of villages into larger bodies or even their demolition, if deemed necessary.

At the same time, the government has launched reforms to boost the local economy on a large scale. It has transformed the rural land management system and has made efforts to modernize the farming sector (the centuries-old agricultural tax was abolished in 2006). It is incentivizing entrepreneurial innovation and providing funds to encourage educated young people to return to their home villages and entrepreneurs who have emigrated to make new investments. A strong boost is being given to rural tourism in particular.

Tourism in China is a rapidly expanding market that is growing in response to the burgeoning middle class and its economic possibilities. This sector of the economy is considered an effective tool to fight the poverty that persists in marginal areas by redistributing the resources from the huge coastal cities inland. In October 2017, during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the unbalanced development of countryside and cities was identified as one of the main problems or 'contradictions' facing the People's Republic. Important objectives have been scheduled for very close time periods: "We must ensure that by the year 2020, all rural residents living below the current poverty line have been lifted out of poverty, and poverty is eliminated in all poor counties and regions."⁸

Rural tourism exploits natural environments, pastoral contexts, agricultural products, as well as rural popular culture – especially that of minority

8. Xi 2017, p. 58.



ethnic groups – and is intended to offer tourist visits, entertainment and shopping opportunities as well as boosting employment and increasing the income of farmers.⁹

According to the *National Tourism Development Report*, rural tourism in China is creating ten million new jobs annually.¹⁰ In 2015, this sector grew 60 per cent with respect to the previous year and it is estimated that during the course of the 13th five-year plan (2016-2020), the number of tourists in the countryside will increase 15 per cent every year, and by 2020, 150,000 villages will be recognized as rural tourism sites with three million operators and four billion tourists in this sector alone.¹¹ In addition to the obvious reasons of economic development, this focus on villages is also motivated by profound cultural and identity-related factors. Now that the country's influential role has acquired a global dimension, we are witnessing the emergence of the need to create a more nuanced, more inclusive and less monolithic Chinese cultural identity.

For millennia, China was a huge agricultural empire with a dense network of ancient rural settlements protecting its territory. The historic heritage, wealth and cultural diversity in certain village that have resisted in the face of ideologies and the onslaught of modernity are an archive of precious resources for the 'Beautiful China' (*meili zhongguo* 美丽中国) promoted by national slogans.¹²

Attitudes have changed radically since only a short time ago when rural environments and traditional life styles were considered hindrances to

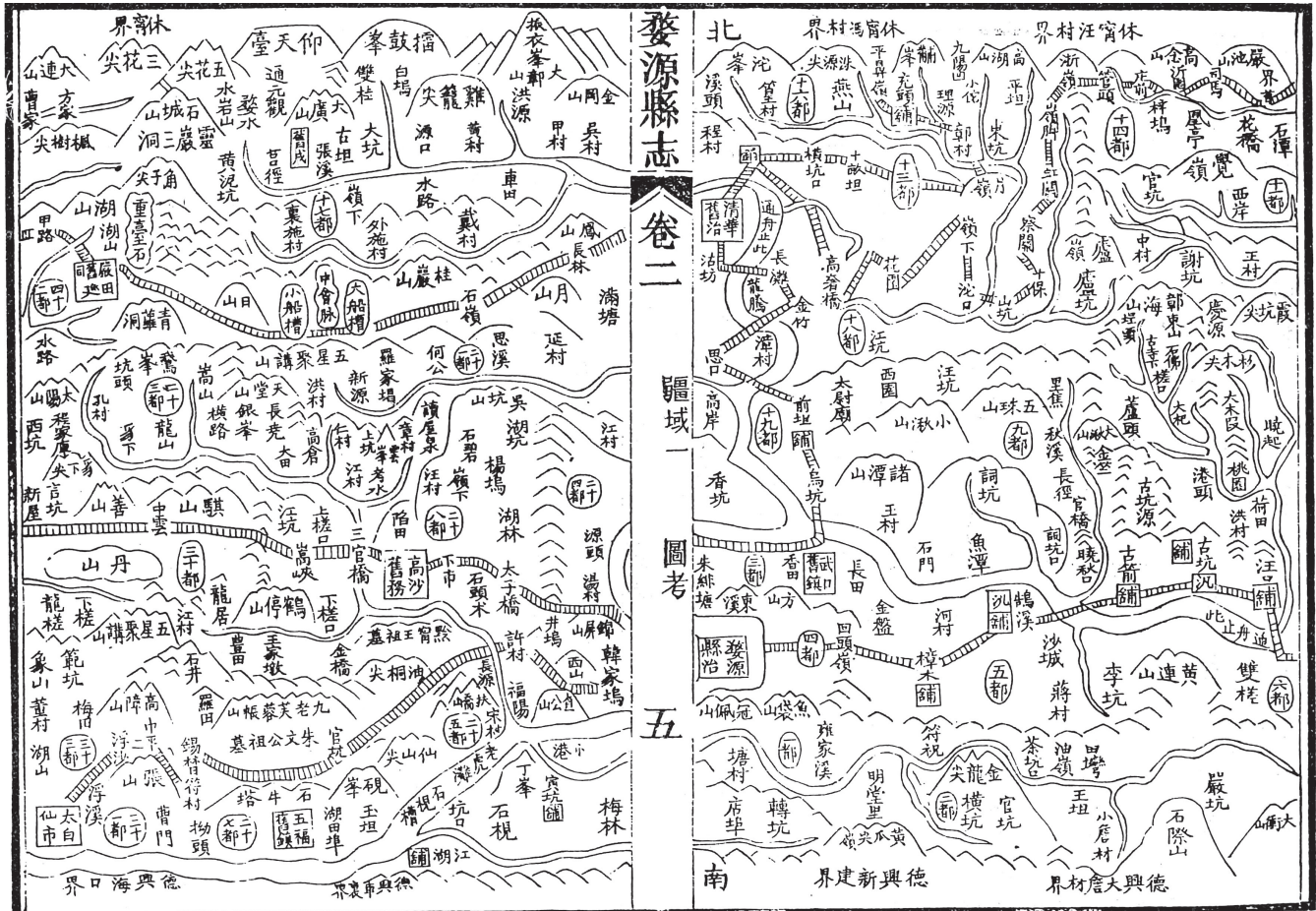
5. A selection of pages from the *Wuyuan xianzhi* 婺源縣志, the Wuyuan County Gazetteer. The ancient maps of the area contained in the county gazetteer accurately represent the elements that structured the territory: roads, water courses, villages (*cun* 村), bridges (*qiao* 橋), mountains (*shan* 山), mausoleums (*mu* 墓), postal stations (*pu* 舖), military garrisons (*xun* 汛), administrative divisions and other features.

9. Agriculture 2010.

10. *National Tourism Development Report* 2017.

11. *National Tourism Development Report* 2017.

12. Xi 2017, p. 61.



6. One of the maps contained in the *Wuyuan xianzhi* 婺源縣志, the Wuyuan County Gazetteer (detail of fig. 5).

modern development and progress, and villages were either abandoned or drastically overhauled. The rural legacy is now identified by a vast body of values that is no longer limited to monuments or unique forms of architecture but extends to urban fabric, landscapes and complex environmental systems, encompassing even spatial arrangements, agricultural practices, social structures, construction technologies, and philosophies of life. Conservation strategies soon adapted to the new safeguarding regulations and guidelines developed in response to this important change of awareness.

Ever-greater numbers of villages have been recognized as heritage sites and included in lists for their promotion and protection. 2003 saw the publication of the first list of *Historic and cultural villages* (*zhongguo lishi wenhua ming cun* 中国历史文化名镇和村). This was followed in 2012 by another list of *Traditional Villages* (*zhongguo chuantong cunluo* 中国传统村落), which was less rigorous but which also included intangible traditions and landscape in addition to buildings and urban fabric. Each list makes reference to one or more ministries – of urban-rural development, cultural heritage, agriculture and so on – and has its own criteria, guidelines, and regulations.

The most beautiful village in China

Although around thirty traditional historic villages are now listed in the Wuyuan area, this pocket of land enclosed by mountains also boasts numerous panoramic sites and corners where you still have a sense of the archaic landscape.

In the 20th century, when road infrastructures replaced the existing communication system of watercourses and postal routes, Wuyuan and the other counties in the Huizhou region found themselves strongly marginalized. However, their limited transport possibilities and an isolated position also protected villages from the widespread demolitions and reconstructions that took place in many other areas of the country. The original plan of the settlements and better-built dwellings have been preserved, resulting in gradual limited transformations respectful of the historic landscape. The motivations given for the inclusion of the villages of Xidi and Hongcun on the list of World Heritage Sites specifically mention that “the two traditional villages [...] preserve to a remarkable extent the appearance of non-urban settlements of a type that largely disappeared or was transformed during the last century. Their street plan, their architecture and decoration, and the integration of houses with comprehensive water systems are unique surviving examples.”¹³

In recent years the county has become a very popular destination for Chinese tourists. This result was obtained through a targeted policy – the area was identified as an experimental zone for the development of rural tourism¹⁴ – bolstered by major investments and successful communication campaign including the slogan: “Wuyuan, the most beautiful village in China” (*Wuyuan, Zhongguo zuimei de xiangcun* 婺源, 中国最美的乡村).

The combination of rural landscape and traditional villages guaranteed the county’s tourism success and led to the promotion of new safeguarding regulations. It is now forbidden to demolish old buildings or to construct new buildings in historic hamlets. For these reasons, the many construction sites lining the roads are always at a certain distance from villages and the new constructions must be built in a style closely resembling the distinctive appearance of the older buildings in the region.

Agricultural landscape and traditional villages are therefore recognized as a system of complementary aesthetic values, but above all, they are perceived as commodities for tourist consumption and as such are adapted to market demands.

To visit traditional settlements, it is necessary to buy a ticket costing from 60 to 150 yuan (7-20 euros), that may be valid for entry to several villages or on multiple days. Profits are managed by investment companies – based on a model of public-private partnership – which supply the villages with the services necessary for tourism: ticket kiosks, parking facilities, toilets, information boards and so on. Rural itineraries are supported by new structures and panoramic observation decks while farmers have been encouraged to grow ornamental crops like rapeseed, lotuses, grapes, and

13. *Ancient Villages* 2000.

14. QIN 2013.



7

7. Yancun 延村, Sikou, Wuyuan county, December 2018. Above the entrances to the dwellings are *menzhao* 门罩, small canopies made from bricks and grey stone with finely carved bas-reliefs featuring floral motifs, birds, landscapes or geometric patterns.

8. Likeng 理坑, Tuochuan, Wuyuan county, December 2018.

9. Sixi 思溪村, Sikou, Wuyuan county, December 2018. Inside the historic dwellings, wooden beams, balustrades and roof brackets are finely decorated with high-relief scenes and patterns. Doors and windows have pierced screens allowing light and air to pass.

10. Tianguan Shangqing 天官上卿, Likeng 理坑, Tuochuan, Wuyuan county, December 2018. This house was built under Emperor Wan Li (1563-1620), during the Ming dynasty. The traditional local dwellings have ground-floor rooms opening onto a skywell (*tianjing* 天井) that allows light and air to enter the building.



8



9



10



11

Set into the pavement of these skywells is a cistern for the collection of water (*si shui gui tang* 四水归堂) connected to a drainage system channelling wastewater into conduits outside the building. In 2006, the building, which has a ground-floor room used as an ancestral room, was placed on the register of nationally protected historic buildings and sites. The village of Likeng 理坑, which was originally known as Liyuan 理源, is situated in the mountains of Wuyuan county, between the provinces of Jiangxi and Anhui, and dates to the Southern Song dynasty (960-1127).

11. Tianguan Shangqing 天官上卿, Likeng 理坑, Tuochuan, Wuyuan county, December 2018. The stone bases of the wooden columns in this ancestral room are decorated with vegetable motifs. The wood, stone, and brick decorations are typical of this region and are known as "the three carvings of Huizhou" (*huizhou sandiao* 徽州三雕).



12



13

12. Wangcun 汪村, Sikou, Wuyuan county, December 2018.

13. Huangliangkeng 黄良坑, Sikou, Wuyuan county, December 2018. The entrance to the village is usually identified by the presence of landmarks, a small pagoda, an old tree, or covered bridge.

14. In the background is the village of Huangliangkeng 黄良坑, Sikou, Wuyuan county, December 2018. Villages are compact with a small land footprint to reduce the consumption of arable land. They are usually inhabited by a hundred or so families. The hamlets are joined by narrow paths running beside the water courses and between rice fields. The hilly to mountainous terrain is mostly covered in woods.

15. Likeng 理坑, Tuochuan, Wuyuan county, December 2018.



14

chrysanthemums. Visitor flows intensify during seasonal flowerings, with peaks in mid March when rapeseed flowers are in bloom, surrounding villages in a sea of yellow, and in the autumn with its flaming red maples.

Management of resources is monopolized by city-based tourist investment companies seeking short-term profits that acquire rights to use terrains and dwellings, while locals can generally expect only poor dividends obtained by way of compensation or income from low level tourist jobs. In the past this has resulted in situations occasionally generating tensions between the local population and visitors.¹⁵

The picture emerging from the interpretation of the current dynamics is an extremely complex one and not without contradictory aspects. The economic growth model promoted by the State to improve the wellbeing of rural populations actually has little impact on the economic and social fabric of the areas that it is intended for and many of the projects implemented are actually a threat to the historic and cultural heritage that is recognized and protected by national policies.

While high quality local produce – like organic green tea – undoubtedly plays an important role in safeguarding the local territory and its underlying social fabric, at the same time it is clear that the traditional system is highly fragile and could be overwhelmed by excessive expectations and forceful dynamics.

15. WANG 2014, p. 152.



15

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