

The Transformation of Desert Settlements in Inner Mongolia: Tradition and Politics

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Abstract

This paper explores the entangled relationship between tradition and politics behind the transformation of desert settlements in Inner Mongolia in the context of China's rapid urbanization. It does so by focusing on one case study: Alxa League, a marginal league located at the west end of the narrow Inner Mongolia region with most of its rammed earth dwellings reconstructed after the government's "Ten Full Coverage" policy and "Ten Models of All-Region Tourism" policy in 2014-2016. The former aimed at demolishing old villages and creating new or modern settlements in the region's rural pasturing areas, and the latter aimed at creating model tourist destinations in the region. Under the former, many vernacular houses with unique regional features and age-long histories have been torn down, with their residents relocated in new modern settlements. Under the latter, ten vernacular settlements were selected in the Left Banner area as the model tourist destinations for comprehensive redevelopment.

This paper examines the mechanisms, politics and effects of redeveloping vernacular dwellings and settlements based on field observations and interviews with local residents, officials and designers. It reveals the project a failed one with many deficiencies.

The paper concludes by reflecting the tangled relationship between tradition and politics in the context of Chinese urbanization based on the findings from

this case study. It provides a criticism on current discourse on rural reconstruction and calls forth more sensible approaches in rural redevelopment which encourage local participation in creating a unique place identity.

Introduction

China has been undergoing rapid rural-urban transition and transformation in the last two or three decades in the process of its high-speed urbanization¹ (Kam Wing Chan, 2010). This process is closely related to the state policies, for example, the collectivization of agriculture; the implementation of a 'household responsibility system'; rural industrialization² (Fang and Liu, 2014); 'Urban and rural integration' and 'the transformation of farmers into urbanities', which will be achieved through "Building a New Socialist Countryside"³ (David Bray, 2013).

Inner Mongolia is no exception, such as the influential policies like "ecological resettlement(1998)" and "returning grazing lands to grasslands(2002)"⁴. The transition from "league" to "municipality" since 1976⁵ (Uradyn E. Bulag, 2002) speaks to the fact that Inner Mongolia is undergoing a rapid politically-oriented urbanization process. Consequently, the impact of globalization is infiltrating minority habitats, and political promotion of rural modernization becomes its accelerator. Furthermore, changes of social identity took place in ethnic mixed areas, and should be integrated into the study of vernacular architecture.



Figure 1. On January 27, 2014, at the “Blessing for the Five Livestock” ceremony of the winter Nadamu Fair in Baoligen Sumu (township), Xilinhot City, Xi Jinping dipped the fresh milk in the silver bowl with the ring finger and flicked his finger three times according to the Mongolian custom, blessing that the next year, the weather is good, the livestock are prosperous, and the people are happy and healthy. Xinhua News Agency reporter Pang Xinglei

The article attempts to connect with the study of vernacular architecture in the global context by understanding or observing the changes in the social identity of the ethnic mixed areas in the context of politically-oriented globalization based on the comprehensive reading of the vernacular architecture.

It bases empirically on a case study of Alxa League, a marginal league with sixty-three percent herding population, and has experienced politically promoted rural modernization since recent years. It explains how the tradition was reconstructed associated with ups and downs in the area’s development under a series of policies between 2014 and 2017.

Alxa League, located at the west end of the narrow Inner Mongolia region, is one of the three leagues in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region that have not yet rectified into municipalities. Three deserts, Badain Jaran Desert, Tengger Desert, and Ulan Buh Desert, traverse the whole area and collectively called the Alxa Desert, ranking fourth in the world and second in China. The rest of the deserts, is a large area of desert grassland, lived by the nomads for generations since ancient times. So far, in the Alxa League, there are still 45818 people living on pure animal husbandry⁶, which accounts for 63 percent of the total rural population, and more than 90 percent of them are Mongols.

Politics: When Tradition Encountered Politics, is it the End or Hyper of the Tradition?

On January 29, 2014, General Secretary Xi Jinping’s visit to Inner Mongolia, has prompted Inner Mongolia to take concrete actions to implement the important speech spirits of Xi’s visit and “to build the beautiful scenery in the northern borderlands in China” as an important part of the political speech has been put forward. Thus the “Ten Full Coverage” Policy came into being.

Look back to March 2006, China’s National People’s Congress officially promulgated the central government’s intention to “build a new socialist countryside” (XNCJS), a new policy initiative and approach to rural development. Subsequently, many provinces and cities across the country have formulated action plans for Beautiful Village construction and acted on plans to speed up the construction of a new socialist countryside. By 2012, the construction of “Beautiful village” has become a synonym for the construction of a new socialist countryside in China, a new upsurge of Beautiful Village is sweeping across the country. It is noteworthy that (Ahlers and Schubert, 2009) XNCJS should be regarded as a policy framework or macro-policy. We use the term macro-policy to denote a policy framework that features a central stimulus in terms of slogans and rough guidelines for implementation, while delegating the main work of policy concretization to local governments. The Ten Full Coverage Project can be seemed as a detailed policy promoted by Wang Jun, General Secretary of the local government then, in response to Xi Jinping’s speech spirit of “building the beautiful scenery in the northern borderlands in China”.

The first strategy of the policy is to complete the reconstruction of old and dilapidated buildings for 520,000 households of farmers and herdsman within three years⁷. As of the end of July 2016, the autonomous region had completed an investment of 108.865 billion yuan⁸, of which the investment in the reconstruction of old and dilapidated building was 53.92 billion yuan, accounting for 43.3% of the total investment.

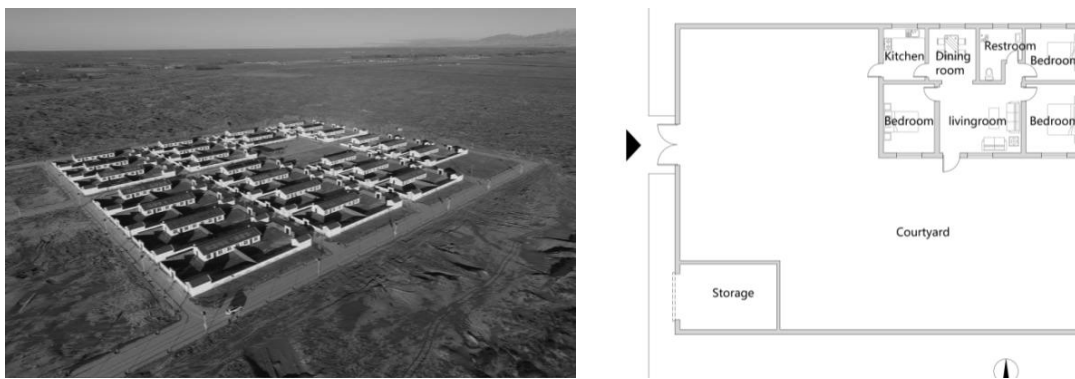


Figure 2. The first new settlements were built at the north of Gong, drawing by the author in Dec, 2015

This study traced and investigated the transformation of houses in the rural area of the Alxa region under this policy from Oct, 2014 to Jun, 2017. Throughout the implementation process of this policy, it found that there are four stages of spatial intervention (the four stages are not completely separated, they may vary and even throughout the course, however, the government's periodic leading project can be classified according to the progress of the project), which has brought irreversible drastic changes to the traditional vernacular architecture in Alxa League as well as the entire Inner Mongolia.

Prelude: "The Development of New Villages"

The new "village" residential development can be seen as the first response of local governments (municipal government) to the "Ten Full Coverage" Policy in the start-up period. In the spring of 2014, pilot villages were established in a few key Gacha (village), called "Centralized relocated district". By observing in Alxa league, the development usually start from not big scale, but feature by "duplication and arrangement" of military camps. These new villages are not only monotonous and stereotyped, but also lack of public space. What's more, as for site selection, new villages will focus more on the main roads close to highways. It has been observed that they often function as a "prelude" on the main roads to the local governments' (township government) office buildings and create a "New look" for the upcoming inspection teams (an inspection team is usually composed of several officials from autonomous regional

government and a few municipal government officials). Given the vast territory of Inner Mongolia and the scattered towns, the teams usually take a Coaster bus for inspection and only get off the bus at important project sites. So the new villages act as curtains to cover those real "dirty, chaotic and backward" local environment (David Bray, 2013).

The construction and the layout of the new houses have mostly imitated the layout of the modern apartment block. They usually have two bedrooms, one living room and one bathroom or three bedrooms, two living rooms and one bath room. Modern bright floor tiles are laid indoors, making the interior look bright and transparent together with the white lime wall, completely changing the past dim interior images of the old adobe houses. However, during the survey, such modern living spaces are rarely lived. They are often far away from cultivated lands and sheepfolds, and the yards are far less flexible than the original outdoor space. More importantly, in winter, such new houses with a "huge" area and "cold" materials are difficult to heat up in a comparatively short time. Old houses (mostly adobe houses) only need a certain amount of coal to heat up, while houses in new village will consume more than three times of the original amount. Apart from the above reasons, even if the government has already given 80,000 yuan per household as housing subsidies, farmers and herdsman still have to bear the remaining construction costs. Therefore, the first stage of the government's urbanization work has not improved much. Most of the farmers and herdsman in Alxa still prefer their original settlements and are not reluctant to move into the new villages.



Figure 3. the process of renovation; the renovated houses

Core: "Reconstruction of Old and Dilapidated Buildings"

As the policy moved forward, a notice, named as The Implementation Plan for the Promotion of the Ten Full Coverage Projects in Rural Pastoral Areas, had been issued by the General Office of the Party Committee of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region on July 29, 2014. The first plan is the reconstruction of old and dilapidated houses for 520,000 households of farmers and herdsmen within three years. According to their report, by the end of 2014, houses of 615,000 households had been reconstructed.

The enormous capital input in such short time is faced with two problems: how to define "old and dilapidated houses" and how to reconstruct these houses. In terms of the definition of "old and dilapidated houses", there is no professional statement can be found in the official policy documents. Therefore, how to judge whether it needs to be reconstructed, or the standard for judging whether it should be reconstructed in the implementation process has become a problem. The ambiguity of the standard has created obstacles for the smooth implementation of the policies in the later period, and it also laid a foreshadowing for the evolution of the policy in the future as "without a single adobe house".

In fact, if structural problems of old and dilapidated houses need to be completely solved during the reconstruction process, the cost and technical requirements are both very high. In the absence of detailed standards and technical support, implementation has become a matter of crossing the river by feeling the stones. It can be expected that within such a short period, such large-scale reconstruction

work will inevitably be defective or even fail.

According to the author's investigation in 2015, most of the local houses in Alxa have "worn red hats" and "put on new clothes". The reason is that the government has used red colour steel plates, light section steel structure to cover the original roof, painted and plastered walls, and replaced facades of doors and windows sometimes. Such measures will not only impose a burden on the originally fragile structures of old buildings, without improving the living environment of the residents, but also bring about problems of roof noise in rain or heavy wind.

Climax: "The Complete Demolition of Adobe Houses"

In 2015, with the heated promotion of policies, the local policy (municipal) adopted "without a single adobe house in sight" as a new rural-reconstruction standard and a political slogan by the Autonomous Region's government. By the end of 2015, old and dilapidated houses (adobe houses) were "wiped out" by means of carpet search. "Complete demolition" is another way to encourage people to move into new villages. "Without a single adobe house in sight" can be regarded as an "interpretation" of local government's evaluation criteria for "old and dilapidated houses". Judging from safety, it is simple and seemingly reasonable. However, it has caused irreparable consequences. The example is the Xinitaohai Gacha, 5.6 kilometers north of Gonghuduge Gacha, which was torn down as a whole in 2016 after the reconstruction in September 2015. It wasn't exempted from demolition even if it was transformed.

So far, driven by the official requirements of



Figure 4. Gonghuduge Gacha, aerial images in 2010 and 2016



Figure 5. the herdsman's housing in the "redevelopment" period

"rapidness, standardization and unification", the grand "Ten Full Coverage" project which lasts for two years has forced its vernacular houses to a stalemate. More and more voices call for "protecting culture", "protecting individuality" and "refusing color-steel roofs". The shift in strategy at the beginning of 2016 seems to have brought a favorable turn.

Rescue: "Redevelopment for Cultural Renaissance"

In the first half of 2016, with the boom of "all-region tourism" in China, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region also proposed a plan for all-region tourism that goes along the "Ten Full Coverage" project (with the same capital source). The local government of Alxa Left Banner took this opportunity to build "Ten Demonstration Sites for All-region Tourism". This project aims to select 10 sites with history, culture and tourism potential, let their local constructions and landscapes being preserved and renovated, and making them tourist destinations. The previously neglected "tradition" of the built environments has now come under the spotlight, becoming an opportunity to revitalize local tourism in the eyes of local government.

Another reason is that, leaders of local

government think that the inspection team may get bored when they see same constructions again and again along the "journey" from the east to the west of the Region. Therefore, local governments believe the key to obtain praise and honour is to stand out with features. This supposed people's livelihood project has, in the end, become a race for "perfect answer" judged by autonomous region's leader in local authorities.

Conclusion

So far, factors like tradition, politics and even identities in this case are all in place, which makes the livelihood transformation project with large capital input from the government seem even absurd. Behind it was the issue of globalization. As said by AlSaiyyad(2014), cater to 'the Other'. The new norm appears to be the outright manufacture of heritage coupled with the active consumption of tradition in the built environment. For this study, the author found that such vernacular architecture, which is occupying a large proportion of rural dwellings in Alxa league, mainly as adobe houses which have potential security problems and are inadequate of distinctive ethnic architectural style, is actually a 'hybridized built environment', but becomes a stumbling block to the development of rural urbanization

in the eyes of the ruling party, they are neglected and even dismissed as symbols of backwardness and poverty and torn down in a regional wide policy to respond to a nationwide “Step into a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects” target. It can be said that the transformations they underwent cater to the eyes of “others” embedded in the complicated political and tourism discourses. Thus, their own authentic traditions and identities have been continuously confused today.

Endnotes

1. Kam Wing Chan, “Fundamentals of China's Urbanization and Policy”, *China Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2010):63-93
2. Fang Yangang, Liu jisheng, “The modification of North China quadrangles in response to rural social and economic changes in agricultural villages:1970-2010s”, *Land Use Policy*, 39(2014):266-280
3. DAVID BRAY(2013). Urban Planning Goes Rural: Conceptualising the "New Village", *China Perspectives*, No. 3 (95) (2013), pp. 53-62
4. Miller, Rick. “UNSETTLED MEANING: MEMORIALIZING LOST MOBILITY THROUGH A MONUMENT IN ORDOS, INNER MONGOLIA.” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 24, no. 1 (October 1, 2012): 22–22.
5. Uradyn E. Bulag.(2002) From Yeke-juu League to Ordos municipality. *Journal of Provincial China*, Vol.7, No.2, October 2002:197. Until 1976, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region had only two municipalities, Baotou and Hohhot. Now there are seven additional municipalities: Wuhai established in 1976, Chifeng in 1983, Tongliao in 1999, Ordos in 2001, Hulunbuir in 2002, Bayannuur and Ulaanchab in 2003, outnumbering the prefecture-level leagues: Alashan, , Shilin-gol, and Hinggan.
6. The data come from Alxa league Statistics Bureau and Alxa league Agricultural and pastoral Bureau.
7. Quoted from a notice of *The Implementation Plan for the Promotion of the Ten Full Coverage Projects in Rural Pastoral Areas* , print and distribute by the General Office of the Party Committee of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and the General Office of the People's Government of the Autonomous Region.
8. 金玮, 内蒙古“十个全覆盖”工程取得显著成效, 《内蒙古统计》2016.04刊