



Rippling: towards untamed domesticity

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The paper proposes ‘rippling’ as a practice of untamed domesticity that contests the hegemony of the essentialised model of modern nuclear family and its associated domesticity. The conceptualisation of ‘rippling’ derives from a context of the dissolved household in contemporary rural China — they are families of China’s 285 million floating population who have seen the absence of a middle generation. At the intersection of architecture and anthropology, and with Shigushan village in Wuhan as the primary site of fieldwork since 2015, the point of entry is spatial and ethnographic observations and documentations of everyday practice in and around ordinary self-built family houses. The material traces and empirical evidence manifest a constantly diffused distinction between the domestic and the public, enacted by the rural dissolved household. In this way, the practice of ‘rippling’ defies the confinement and codification of domesticity. Importantly, ‘rippling’ and ‘dissolving’ are a temporary, transient state that has become part of a broader structure rather than an exception. Through inhabiting and altering a multiplicity of spatial, social, and political thresholds, an elastic form of association is enacted, through which the act of mediating between genders, generations, households, neighbours, and the village community is constantly framed, and even spreads to the city through ‘floating’. Spatially stretched from house to territory and temporally coordinated from daily to multi-year cycles, domesticity as such is untamed.

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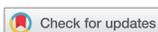
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Introduction: floating, dissolving, rippling

The notion of a floating population in China is not new. Four decades since the economic reforms of the 1980s, this internal rural-to-urban migration has supplied a cheap labour force that powers up the country’s manufacturing, construction, and service industries among others, vital to its unprecedented urban growth. The total number had reached 285 million by 2020.¹ Strategic relaxations of the *hukou* (household registration) system permits temporary migration, but with limited rights for migrant workers in cities, while a rural

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hukou grants them rights to collectively owned farm land and house plot in the home village of registration.² The 'floating' status can be understood, physically, as the movement between workplaces in the city and a home village in the countryside, and, psychologically, as a state of suspension — moving frequently and working tirelessly to a point that routine life is suspended.³ Demographic studies have suggested that the back-and-forth movement of these workers is only partially due to their limited rights to employment, housing, and social welfare in cities; they are also partially motivated by a desire to live this way.⁴ The floating lifestyle allows them to acquire higher incomes in the city and at the same time secure economic and social roots in the countryside.

In the countryside, the effect of this phenomenon is the dissolution of the household. Rural migrant workers go to cities to work, leaving behind their ageing parents and young children (Fig. 1). For more than 80% of rural families in China, the middle generation is missing.⁵ I term rural families of this kind 'the dissolved household'. The missing middle generation often sends a large portion of their earnings back home to sustain the livelihood of family members in the village and to fund the construction of new family houses. As a shared aspiration of the rural society, building a new family home symbolises the rising socio-economic status of a household in a village. A considerable amount of rural migrant workers return to their villages when they retire from jobs in cities. Their adult children then take their turn to leave the village, and the returned generation take care of their grandchildren. Floating and dissolving come full circle. The research thus asks: What is the socio-spatial practice of the dissolved household?

The point of entry is to look closely into the immediate context that the dissolved household shapes and is shaped by, that is, the self-built family house. Ironically, while being a predominant element that constitutes China's contemporary rural landscape, these houses are increasingly considered as a threat to the beauty of the countryside due to their often clumsy concrete construction and coarse exterior covered by cheap paint or simple tiles. They have been dismissed in terms of their cultural and aesthetic values, as well as building techniques. Contrary to these prejudices, the paper intends to demonstrate how these ordinary self-built family houses embody contemporary rurality and manifest a fundamental change in the idea of family and domesticity. What has emerged is an intergenerational, interdependent way of living, which can be understood as a ripple effect of domesticity. A further question arises: What is the agency of historical change in a state of dissolving and rippling — when the temporary, transient state of being has become part of a broader structure rather than an exception?

Not to romanticise, the practice of the dissolved household is opportunistic, and essentially a survival tactic of the marginalised. As vulnerable participants situated within and subordinated to the capitalist machine, instead of confronting, they find ways to relate to the agents of power. These are actions with no lexical declarations, struggles with no overt conflicts, and stories with no heroes or heroines. Yet, tremendous knowledge lies in the capturing of latent and temporal dispositions in order to find possibilities between dominant forces, agents, and systems, which may lead to altering the interplay between them.



Figure 1.
The moment of dissolving captured
on camera, 2016, photographed by
Zhi Guo; in public domains such as
sohu.com

Diminished and overlooked by the dominant culture as well as the paternalistic model of experts' leadership, this knowledge is dispersed and circulated as part of the daily life in the margins. The paper sought to demonstrate means of connecting and disclosing this largely non-discursive, highly contextual, and bodily forms of knowledge embedded in the ordinary self-built family houses and the everyday practice that takes place in and around them.

In short, the situated knowledge in the practice of 'floating', 'dissolving', and 'rippling' is about inhabiting and altering a multiplicity of spatial, social, and political thresholds and enacting interdependency. In fact, how to live together and organise ourselves is a renewed and ever more pressing global challenge. Models and imaginations of social networks of care and support beyond the nuclear family structure are much needed. The margin is indeed a space of



Figure 2.
Map of Shigushan village, Wuhan
City, Hubei Province, PRC, 2018,
drawn by the author

suffering and struggle, but also a profound edge where alternatives are conceptualised and often improvised, deriving from the mundane moments, vulnerable states, peculiar alterations, and partial perspectives.

Methodology: at the intersection between architecture and anthropology

Central to the enquiry is the relationship between domestic space, family relations, and household management. This renders essential an interdisciplinary approach between architecture and anthropology. Participant observation — the classic anthropological method that enables ‘a way of knowing from the inside’⁶ — is coupled with architectural survey, given that cases of contemporary self-built rural family houses are largely under-documented.⁷

The primary site is Shigushan village, about one to two-hour drive away from central Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei province (Fig. 2, Fig. 3). With less than half of its registered population of approximately 1,000 still living there, Shigushan exemplifies villages with a severely dwindling labour force in close proximity to metropolitan areas in China. Through various forms of collaboration, I have been working with the village since 2015 to gather first-hand materials by taking measurements of buildings, producing survey drawings, conducting semi-structured interviews, as well as directing an on-going documentary film of the village life. Several families and their houses are discussed in this paper as the main case studies, revealing ‘why [decisions] were taken, how they were implemented and with what results’.⁸ This approach hinges on the

Figure 3.
Aerial view of the main settlement in Shigushan village, 2017, footage by Architectural Association Wuhan Visiting School, co-directed by the author



idea that generalisable knowledge can be extracted from selected typical cases and, thus, transferred or applied to other cases. The fieldwork has gradually built up an empathic comprehension of everyday practices of rural households through intimate personal experiences and participations. In this way, fieldwork provides a concrete point of entry into the subject of study, and defines the lens through which the subject matter is approached and analysed.

The ripple effect of domesticity and the dissolved household

Ms Guo's house in Shigushan village is a typical self-built rural family house (Fig. 4). Entering the ornamental gate, a yard connects a two-storey building to the north, providing the main living space for the five family members (Ms Guo and her husband, Ms Guo's elderly mother, and two sons), and a flanking building to the west contains a shared dining room and kitchen. The enclosed yard is where vegetable plots and family possessions are arranged and stored: small areas for black sesame, carrots, and peanuts, and storage are distributed along its edges and in corners. This layout clearly shows how family members move daily between the buildings through the yard to cook and eat, plant

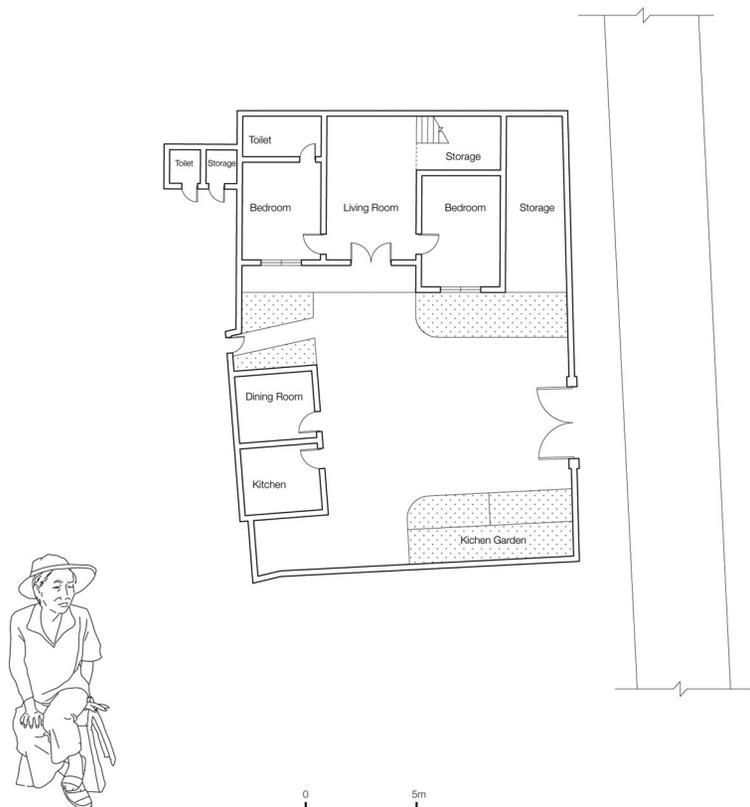


Figure 4.
Ms Guo's family house, Shigushan
village, Wuhan City, Hubei Province,
PRC, 2017, drawn by the author

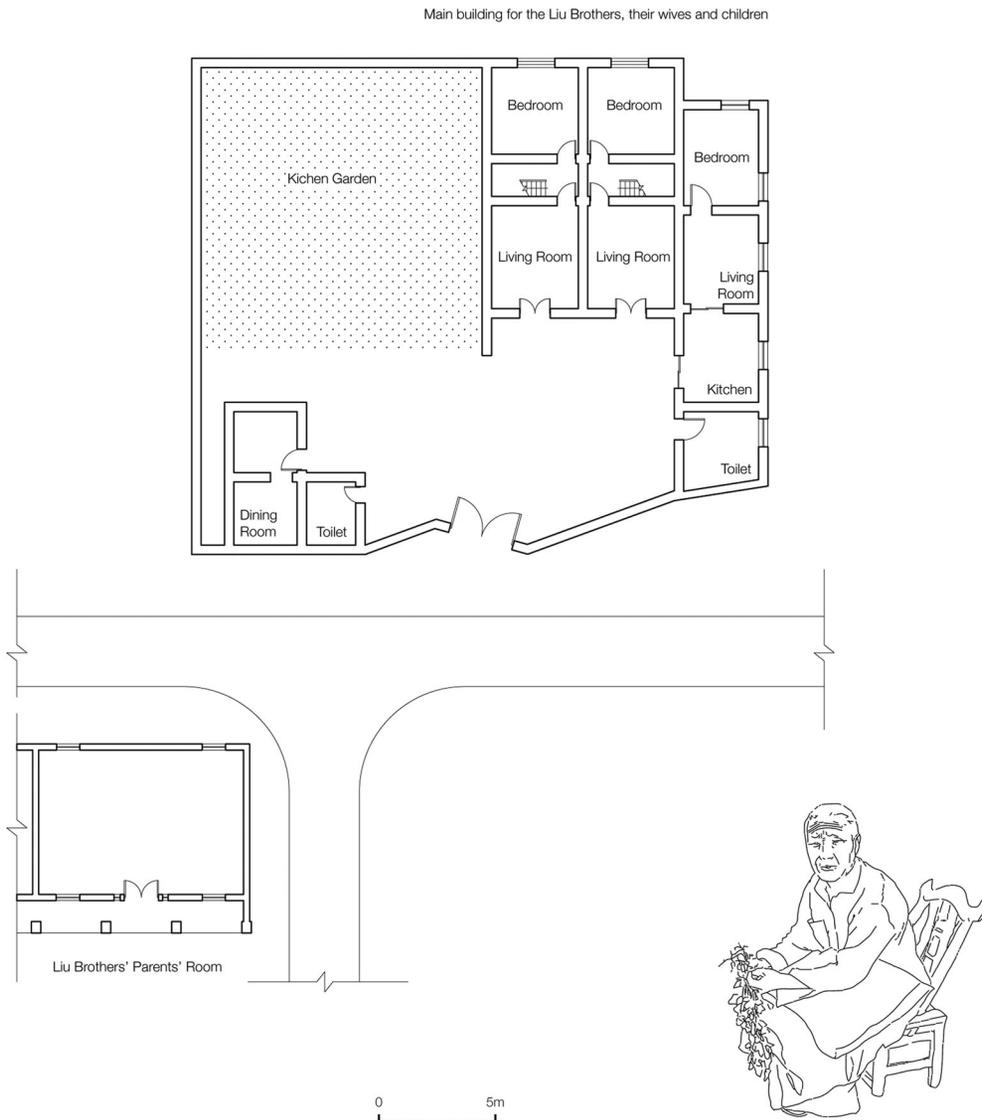
vegetables, and feed domestic livestock (Fig. 5). Therefore, the yard is the nucleus of the family house, the locus of the family's daily activities and a productive space for villagers where produce can be dried, handicraft products made, and domestic animals raised. In short, the yard provides a spatial structure through which domestic labour and subsistence production are organised.

While Ms Guo's house presents the basic picture of contemporary rural multigenerational living, the changing family structure and modes of household management resulting from the missing middle generation reveals itself when Ms Guo's house is compared with that of the Liu brothers from the same village. As the main labour force securing the family incomes, the Liu brothers work in the transportation industry in the coastal regions in China, more than a thousand kilometres away from their home village where their wives, children, and parents live together.⁹ The demands for independence, and separation by family branches and generations, can be seen in their house configuration: even though the two brothers' families live in the same three-storey building, they have identical yet separate entrances, living rooms, and staircases; even though half of the rooms in the main building are vacant, their parents still choose to live in adapted old school rooms across the street, providing them with their own living room and bedroom (Fig. 6). In general terms, as in Ms Guo's house, the centre of family life is the yard, a buffer zone between the brothers' main building and their parents' room, where all three parties of the family share two kitchens, two toilets, a dining room, and a kitchen garden (Fig. 7).¹⁰ This configuration makes evident that the yard mediates family relations and household management.

Nevertheless, the yard should not be seen as a homogenous typological element in itself. The transformation of a secondary family yard by Liu brothers' parents from a bare leftover space to a rather structured yard shows how they have really layered the buffer zone in-between the adapted old school rooms and the street (Fig. 8).¹¹ The corridor through which they access their rooms have been turned into a semi-open kitchen, and a shading structure was added extending out from the corridor towards their yard with a new gate that connects to the street. This is where they sometimes cook together with their daughter-in-law and where they sometimes have meals rather than inside. In short, the boundary space is thickened and inhabited. Traces of how they organise their lives are also inscribed in the distribution of daily objects, such as tables, chairs, racks of clothes, tools, water basins and tanks, and so on. Notably, it is also quite common to see outdoor furniture and objects appear in the living room, where their arrangements appear fluid. To an extent, the living room can be seen as a boundary space extending inwards (Fig. 9). These are lively manifestations of domesticity lodging around the boundary space. Crucially, the outflow of domestic activities is not because of a lack of space as usually observed in overcrowded urban informal dwellings. Given that space is in abundance, the thickened, inhabited boundary manifests a specific spatial delineation that conditions domestic association and negotiation. It facilitates the idea that cooking, eating, gardening, the care of children, and the elderly are shared and joint responsibilities,

Figure 5.
Examples of family yards in
Shigushan village and Chentian
village, Wuhan City, Hubei
Province, PRC, 2018 and 2022,
photographed by the author and
Chen Zhan





which largely defines the daily life of these families. At the same time, the boundary condition sustains a sense of separation, reminding that all of this takes place in delicate forms of collaboration within the extended family between genders, generations, and households.

When houses aggregate, especially ones owned or built by family members within an extended family in adjacent plots, a domestic field starts to emerge. The Wen family is the village cook in Shigushan for generations. Mr Wen and his wife live together with their granddaughter, while their son and daughter are away working in different cities. The Wen family built a new house in the

Figure 6.
Liu brothers' family house,
Shigushan village, 2016, drawn by
the author



Figure 7.
The main yard in Liu brothers'
family house, Shigushan village,
2016, photographs and collage by
the author

2000s right next to their old house, which was then converted into a space for cooking, raising livestock, and storage. A decade later, his son built a third house just across the street. Including two nearby fishponds owned by the family, the domestic domain of the Wen family is not just confined to their three buildings, but the immediate context that these buildings are situated in (Fig. 10). Boundaries of this domain are hardly marked by walls, but rather by daily objects placed around the houses, along the street in-between, and by activities happening around these. Domestic activities not only outflow from rooms through thick boundaries towards the yard, but also leak to the street or linger around thresholds, such as: sharing meals in close proximity to the gate of the yard by street side, sitting right at the gate to sort peanuts, or working inside the yard with the gate open remaining in sight of potential passer-by (Fig. 11). Differently put, family houses are like pebbles dropped in water, and the spreading ripples are the realm of domesticity, which may change depending on the subject and time. This could be understood as the ripple effect of domesticity.

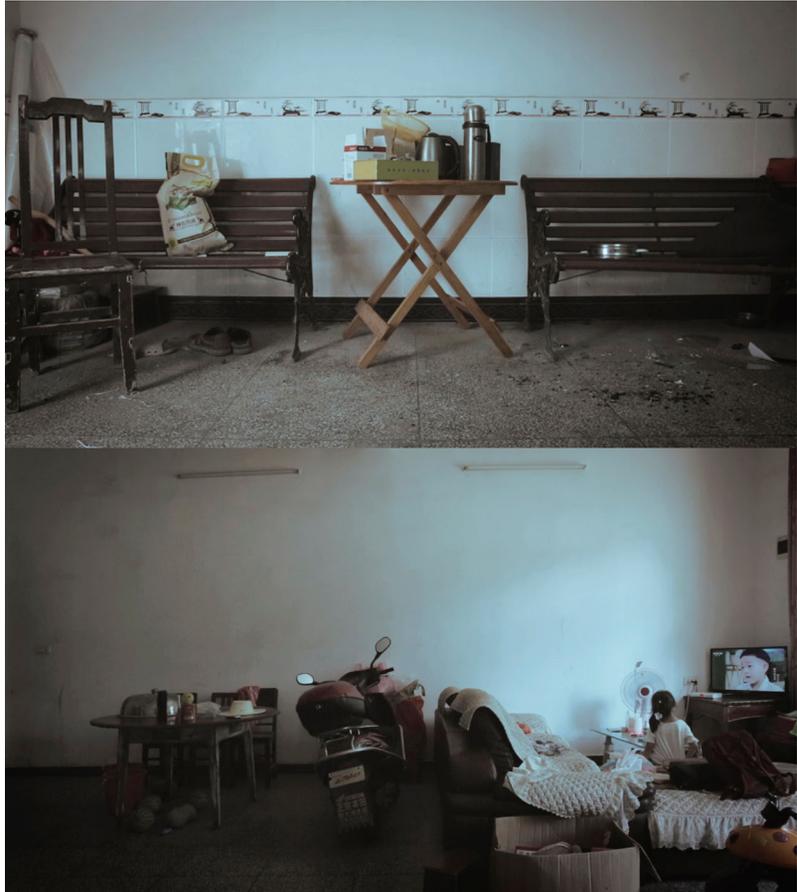
While rippling is an image of the enactment of domesticity in space, it is intrinsically embedded in the social and economic practices of rural families. The missing middle generation results in a flexible, spatially stretched form of labour division and collaboration between genders, generations, and households. It is quite common when both husband and wife work away from home that their parents take care of the children and farmland. The division of labour thus occurs at an intergenerational level. In legal terms, a Chinese rural household¹² is an institutional unit recognised by the state, through which the responsibility for taxation and the three rights of the rural *hukou* are assigned.¹³ In a village, when adult children have gained financial independence, they are entitled to establish a new, individual household subject to the approval of the village committee. In the context of the missing middle generation, the practice of the elderly taking care of land for their



Figure 8.
Shigushan village, 2021–2022; (top and upper-middle) Liu brothers' elderly mother working in her kitchen garden; (lower-middle) Liu brothers' elderly mother cooking together with her daughter-in-law in the semi-open kitchen; (bottom) Liu brothers' elderly mother, her daughter-in-law and a family friend rest in the yard after peanut harvesting; all are film stills from the on-going documentary film, co-directed by Jingru (Cyan) Cheng and Chen Zhan

Film 1
On the Margins (2022), dir. by
Jingru (Cyan) Cheng and Chen
Zhan, see the online full text version
to access film clip

Figure 9.
Examples of outdoor furniture and
objects in the living room,
Shigushan village, 2021–2022, film
stills from the on-going
documentary film, co-directed by
Jingru (Cyan) Cheng and Chen
Zhan



adult children thus manifests in concrete economic terms the dissolving boundary between two households. In situations where the elderly generation is not able to help or work, inter-household assistance takes place within the extended family and sometimes among neighbours. In short, the intergenerational and cross-household dependency on extended family members is increasing. Therefore, this contemporary mode of collaboration reflects the practice of traditional lineage that adjusts its size and composition in accordance with changing family needs. Understandably, there are voices that suggest the extended family tradition is resurgent in today's rural society.¹⁴ A fundamental feature of the traditional Chinese extended family is the social hierarchy and order within the family, centred around the patriarchal authority. However, the absence of the middle generation, particularly men and thus fathers, is significantly disrupting the power structure within families and is shaking the traditional family structure at its core. In other words, while adjustments in traditional lineage were largely patrilineal,



Figure 10.
Mr Wen's family houses, Shigushan
village, 2017, drawn by the author

which served to enhance the patriarchal authority, in the wake of the missing generation, today's rural household arrangements actually dissolve the family hierarchy. Ethnographic studies have evidenced that since the early 2000s Chinese rural society has seen redefined norms of filial piety moving towards a new form of intergenerational solidarity with a descending familism.¹⁵ On these bases and prompted by spatial observations discussed above, the paper proposes that the basis of the rural household is no longer that of a homogenous, well-defined, and closed unit, but rather a state of dissolving and rippling.

Figure 11.
Examples of activities lingering
around thresholds, Shigushan
village, 2021–2022, film stills from
the on-going documentary film, co-
directed by Jingru (Cyan) Cheng
and Chen Zhan, and Chentian
Village, 2018, photographed by
and courtesy of Yizhuo Gao





Figure 12.
Examples of active waiting,
Shigushan village, 2021–2022, film
stills from the on-going
documentary film, *On the Margins*
(2022), co-directed by Jingru (Cyan)
Cheng and Chen Zhan

Film 2
On the Margins (2022), dir. by
Jingru (Cyan) Cheng and Chen
Zhan, see the online full text version
to access film clip



Without doubt, the dissolved household as a phenomenon is symptomatic of the capitalist machine of urbanisation that legitimises the exploitation of rural families by the state under the rubric of development. Family members left behind in the village are primarily women and the elderly, whose housekeeping, childcare, and subsistence production provides a basic form of social security for their families. They make it possible for rural migrant workers to serve as cheap labour that is fuelling China's urban development and prosperity. The work done in home villages is in fact essential to keeping the capitalist machine going in cities, yet unacknowledged, thus as a form of exploitation. Though a circular lifestyle may appear to be a choice made freely by rural migrant workers themselves, the situation that drives this choice is ultimately created by the alliance between market interests, i.e. the need for a mobile labour force, and state power, i.e. restrictions and their modifications imposed through the *hukou* system, for instance. This fundamental alliance is the 'field of power' as defined by Pierre Bourdieu.¹⁶ The concept of 'field' can be understood as the playground of social life as governed by particular sets of social relations, or in Bourdieu's own words, 'a structured social space'.¹⁷ As noted by Bourdieu:

Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space. [...] All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies.¹⁸

In this regard, dissolving the household reflects the position-taking of rural families and how they adjust themselves in order to improve their position in the field. Crucially, the field is not deterministic, as the structuralist point of view may assert. It is rather a dialectic process through which the field and those acting in the field constantly shape and reshape one another. This perspective introduces the possibility of seeing the dissolved household as something beyond the result of exploitation; it manifests the ongoing reconstruction of the immediate context in which rural families live and operate. It thus becomes viable to explore the impact the dissolved household may have on the field of power that is producing it.

In its most basic sense, the social and spatial nexus evolving around dissolved households provides a network of mutual help and immediate care at both domestic and neighbourhood levels, a set of non-market relations essential to people's livelihood. Though initially formed out of domestic economic necessity, new social relations are produced beyond the household level. As discussed earlier, the dissolved household should not be mistaken for a return to the traditional extended family, nor simply associated with a broader and looser notion of the pre-modern family. In a dissolved household, emerging relations are defensive, opportunistic, temporary, and reproduceable. As observed by Xuefeng He, the migration cycle has created a preliminary, medium-scale structure in village production in the sense that the redistribution and integration of farmland is occurring within one extended family or among acquaintances in the village.¹⁹ In other words, the collaboration initiated in the domestic realm of a family is evolving into an adaptive mode of local production

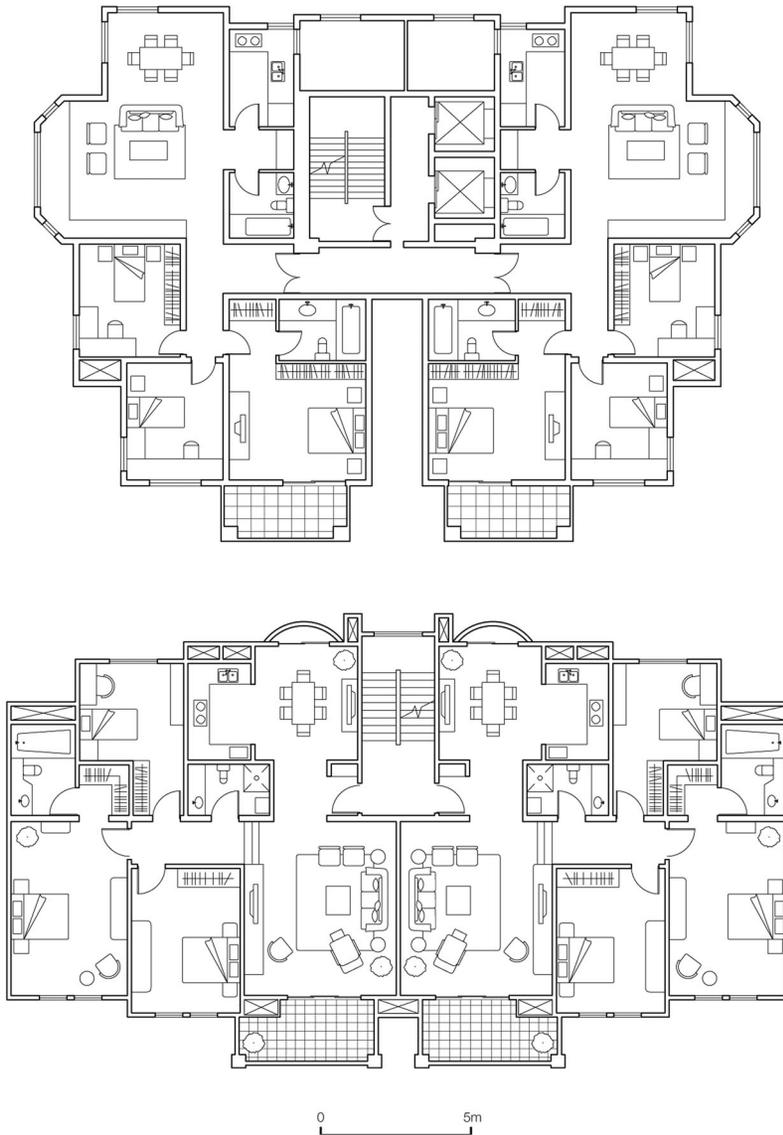


Figure 13.
Proposed housing plans for the
New Zhaishan village community,
with original drawing by Wuhan
Modern Urban Agriculture
Planning Design Institute (UAPDI),
and redrawn by the author, 2017

that crosses the boundary of individual household and works beyond family relations. Of particular significance, this shift marks the moment when atomised rural populations started to reorganise themselves in response to internal forces derived from the society of acquaintances. In this light, the dissolved household may itself become a new form of rural social structure.

Then, when domesticity leaks through thresholds, how far does it go? Where does it stop? Does it stop? Or, might it ripple outwards and infiltrate the village? When all the yards in a village — with their penetrable boundaries

and thresholds — are seen as one underlying structural layer, it is a field of elastic zones around family houses. These zones expand or contract through daily practices, family and village rituals, as well as migration cycles.²⁰ To put it differently, the rippling motion can be triggered by what I call ‘active waiting’, for instance. Active waiting appears mundane, sometimes as simple as taking a chair and sitting at the street corner, or a small group sitting under the shaded porch of a convenience store (Fig. 12).²¹ This simple act embodies a disposition that is continuously attentive to others, anticipating negotiation, mediation, and association. Active waiting on a collective scale is fundamental. By pushing their own bodies to inhabit thresholds, villagers are actively building up an elastic field of support and a sense of relatedness between themselves. Therefore, the ripple effect of domesticity renders a liminal state of constant emerging, unfolding, and becoming. Rippling as a way of living means to settle in liminality — boundaries do not separate but bind and thresholds are not to be passed by but inhabited. These are tactics vital to forming indeterminate yet resilient assemblages of social and economic security that hinge on intergenerational and cross-household dependency.

The hegemony of the nuclear family flat

Since the turn of the new century, China has been ‘Building a New Socialist Countryside’, a national programme that sets out to address rural poverty and inequality through government interventions, or building a ‘Beautiful Countryside’, an updated discourse on rural regeneration in the recent decade. In parallel, a new Urban and Rural Planning Law, which came into effect in 2008, defines township and village planning as independent planning categories for the first time. The policy framework sets up the central role of spatial practices in rural developments. Through a centralised planning regime and the ongoing *hukou* reform, the hierarchical urban structure is extending from the province down through cities, counties, towns, to every single village. New village settlements are being built based on the urban *xiaoqu* (small district) model. Urban nuclear family flats are being employed as the template to reconstruct rural dwellings.

An example of these transformations is the award-winning project for a new rural community in Zhaishan village in the suburban Xinzhou district of Wuhan City, Hubei, which accommodates a population of approximately 12,000 relocated from eight nearby villages that were to be demolished. The primary objectives, as stated in the planning document, are to free up rural land for industrial development and to transform farmers into urban citizens.²² The proposed housing presents the typical urban-style apartment in China (Fig. 13). Two to four units are arranged on the same floor with the shared circulation area connecting the units to the ground level. Each unit consists of a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, two or three bedrooms, and one or two toilets, with the floor area ranging from 90 to 150 m². The potential for multi-generational living is addressed by simply adding more bedrooms. The nuclear

family model of living, where the provision of homes is more a matter of market values, is imposed upon the agricultural fields, creating a violent disjuncture between rural subjects and the built environment.

To understand the impact of this type of nuclear family flat on the rural space first requires an understanding of the nuclear family and the role it has played in the larger socio-political context. It has been widely argued that the family as a basic unit of society has been at the centre of economic and political transformations and is essential to the realisation of new social conditions. In the context of China, coinciding with the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century, the traditional extended family and clan structure started to collapse and were then fiercely deconstructed in the Xinhai Revolution in 1911.²³ The destruction of the traditional form of family was seen at the time as a crucial means to dismantle the feudal ideology. Further fragmentation of the family continued along with the warfare and social upheaval of the following three decades. After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, nationwide collectivisation and industrialisation through the urban *danwei* (work unit) and rural People's Commune aimed to shape the collective subjectivity, thus reduced socio-economic dependency among family members to the bare minimum. While *danwei* indeed largely weakened kin-based networks of mutual obligations, the People's Commune produced contradictions: on the one hand, the patriarchal clan authority was attacked and replaced by state institutions while, on the other, the demographic and material conditions created by the commune were in fact conducive to large, multigenerational households and their networks of nearby kin.²⁴ The collectivisation period came to an end in 1978 when the Economic Reform was launched to create a full-scale market economy. With the One Child Policy implemented in 1980, the idea of the modern nuclear family came into being in China. It was in this context that the nuclear family flat emerged as an essential device to materialise and reinforce the modern definition of family as a small, closed unit. When the state retreated from housing provision as a form of urban welfare through the *danwei* system, housing commodification coupled with a growing real estate market gradually wiped out the collective form of living of the *danwei* and replaced it with a modern lifestyle.²⁵ Home ownership has since become the aspiration of a new urban middle-class, which, apart from promoting urban consumption, also intensifies social stratification and class division.

As a general trend, the nuclearisation of family in urban China since the economic reforms of the 1980s is moving towards the predominant Western-originated idea of the nuclear family and its relationship with a market economy. The Western model — or, more precisely, the Western assumption — is best illustrated by William Goode's classic study on international family changes:

Wherever the economic system expands through industrialization, family patterns change. Extended kinship ties weaken, lineage patterns dissolve, and a trend toward some form of the conjugal system generally begins to appear — that is, the nuclear family becomes a more independent kinship unit.²⁶

Then, through the spatial configuration of housing units, the flat or apartment demarcates a private domain that is exclusively for the family who owns it. This reinforces the idea that everything that happens inside is the domestic affair of the family and thus separate from wider society, which is not the way the family life has been organised historically.²⁷

In the global context, when discussing the modern formation of Japanese domesticity, Jordan Sand notes that 'although the basic forms of domestic life were not themselves new, the notion of "home" as an intimate space sequestered from society and centred on parents and children was alien'.²⁸ Following this modern construct of family, new responsibilities are assigned and a new arrangement of roles within the family is imposed. The resulting gender division of labour, for instance, prescribed a role for women to perform unpaid housework, thus legitimatising a form of exploitation that became a fundamental cause of inequality. Dolores Hayden identifies two acts, largely normalised in industrialisation, that have caused this situation: 'the physical separation of household space from public space, and the economic separation of the domestic economy from the political economy'.²⁹ Though Hayden makes this argument primarily with reference to the American society, it still holds true for contemporary China. This kind of presupposed relationship between family members and required daily practices, as well as an imposed domestic economy, are formalised by the typological composition of the nuclear family flat with distinct boundaries, creating subdivisions and prescribing specific functions to rooms. Therefore, through the conception of the nuclear family and the typology of the nuclear family flat, people became productive members of a modern industrial society, as well as a force of consumption.

Then, what does it mean when the urban nuclear family flat goes rural? In rural regeneration projects, the urban-style apartment comes with the much-needed provision of basic infrastructure and sanitation, making it desirable to many. Improved housing facilities, such as water, electricity, gas, sewage, and internet access, do immediately seem to improve the residents' quality of life, but at the same time they create new financial demands and thus change the everyday life of rural inhabitants. In terms of the spatial configuration, the urban-style apartment layout denies the possibilities of yards, kitchen gardens, orchards, and sheds for livestock or storage, elements that are essential for subsistence production. This disrupts the relationship between production and living, and also breaks a long-standing practice in the Chinese rural society that sees existence as a unified oneness between human and nature. Admittedly, allowing no space for kitchen gardens and domestic animals in urban-style apartments liberates rural inhabitants from heavy housework. However, as a consequence they have no choice but to buy products from local supermarkets that they would otherwise have produced in their yards. In this way, producers are transformed into consumers and rural families are forced into market relations. A new domestic economy is thus imposed.



Figure 14.
The Madu cultural square in New Madu village community, featuring a large sculpture of a leaping horse literally representing the name of the village (from *Ma*, meaning horse), 2014, in *Common Frameworks: Rethinking the Developmental City in China*, ed. by Christopher C. M. Lee (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2016), p. 74, reproduced with permission



Figure 15.
New Madu village community; (top) a resident attending a vegetable plot beside the road, 2014; (bottom) a resident drying harvest in front of the Madu communal hall, 2014; both in *Common Frameworks: Rethinking the Developmental City in China*, ed. by Christopher C. M. Lee (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2016), p. 18, reproduced with permission

The removal of the yard and the possibilities offered through boundaries and thresholds around its zones of penetration is not only intended to exclude domestic livestock and their products from rural family life but also to reconfigure the practices, rituals, and values of rural everyday life. Villagers in Shigushan often described their daily routines as centred around the same two things: the care of livestock and social interaction with fellow villagers. As previously discussed through active waiting, while appearing to be minor, the habitual and material patterns facilitated by spatial porosity are in fact the main source of the social interactions that constitute the fabric of rural life, connecting living and production, and between production with reproduction. Moreover, these seemingly insignificant interactions are crucial moments that reconfirm social bonds beyond family and form the foundation of a network of mutual help and immediate care. In this regard, the removal of these possibilities of minor yet catalytic interactions in the contemporary development of new rural housing is detrimental to the valuable operation as emerged from the dissolved rural household, and the significance of a rural form of life is undermined.

However, it is also through the everyday practice that perhaps the subconscious resistance of rural residents is manifested. The new Madu village community seems to enjoy its new look: walking down the wide concrete road, three-storey family houses are organised in orderly rows on both sides, uniformly clad in red or grey tiles with white trim, yet vegetable plots in the areas beside the road are less harmonious. Villagers continue to reclaim these little plots in leftover common spaces to regain a connection with the land. It is their way of lamenting the removal of the yard and adapting the urban layout of new housing developments to their own rules. The public space in the new Madu village community is generous. A dual carriageway marks the central axis, which cuts across the orthogonal grid of densely distributed family houses, leading to a 'cultural' square and a cluster of public facilities located in the centre of the newly reconstructed village (Fig. 14). However, the roads designed for cars, the cultural square and the open space in front of public facilities are often 'hijacked' by inhabitants to sort and dry their harvest (Fig. 15). This is less because of economic necessity and more about reaffirming the sense of a traditional self and purpose to others, and about maintaining an associated network of 'front-door neighbours'. Indeed, 'social space is an invisible set of relationships which tends to retranslate itself, in a more or less direct manner, into physical space'.³⁰

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau distinguishes 'strategy', a set of relations imposed by the producer who is within the power structure, from 'tactics', actions taken by the consumer or user in situations produced and governed by strategies.³¹ As De Certeau puts it, '[the user] does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order'.³² From this perspective, villagers move into urban-style apartments, the products of the developer, planning bureau, and local government, and at the same time, subvert the

norms of these impose spaces not only with their belongings but also their ways of living. Through the tactics of everyday use, rural inhabitants make their mark on the imposed environment by re-appropriating penetrable opportunities bit by bit according to rules of their own. By reclaiming certain aspects of their way of life through their acts and memories, rural inhabitants resist.³³

The emphasis on the spontaneous spatial alterations to the environment made by local inhabitants is not simply nostalgia about the 'good old days'. It recognises how daily practices in rural life are formed, or in other words, the meaning of the rural lifestyle. In this regard, Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' is of particular relevance. Habitus is notably referred to as a 'feel for the game' that determines agents' intuitions, actions and reactions, perceptions and aspirations — a logic of practice arising from different aspects of social life. The context in which a habitus is formed, in which it operates and in which it reproduces itself, is the field, or simply put, the 'game'. Central to the habitus are the production of practices and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices. Through the relationship between these two, 'the space of lifestyles is constituted'.³⁴ In this light, all the seemingly random tactics and insignificant moments in everyday life that occur around the peripheral zones of penetrations can be understood as the habitus of rural residents and, thus, as the embodiment of the idea of self and the social tools to interact and reshape their social and spatial environment. Therefore, a domestic space that drastically contradicts the existing rural habitus is destructive to the construction of the self and the social identity of rural populations. The so-called progressive urban-style apartment may in fact socially and culturally impoverish rural inhabitants.

In other words, the nuclear family flat reshapes the villagers' subjectivity. As noted by Bourdieu in his study on Algeria, the modern apartment is 'a system of demands inscribed in objective space and asking to be fulfilled, a universe strewn with expectations and thereby generating needs and dispositions', or in short, the modern apartment 'demands the behaviour of a modern man'.³⁵ In the context of China's rural regeneration, the nuclear family flat brings the urban lifestyle to the village, arriving with the myth of the urban good life for a rising middle-class. Ultimately, it is intended to construct the subjects desired by the state, that is, a cheap labour force and a rural consumer class, by reshaping the fine grain of daily household management and social behaviours in village life. When it comes to the state apparatus, while changes in social structures and economic forms are more easily associated with large-scale planning, social engineering at the household level appears less aggressive. As what happens at home is often deemed natural and acceptable, reconfiguration of the domestic space as a mechanism of social control has been softly disguised. This unspoken consensus, deriving from the over-familiarity and intimacy with the idea and experience of home and family, makes a social construct at the household level particularly powerful and pervasive.

Towards untamed domesticity

Rooted in a Western historical setting of rising urbanism, the concept of domestic space is predicated on a fundamental split with its conceptual counterpart, i.e. public space.³⁶ This split has been codified — with various historical iterations — into the typology of the modern nuclear family flat, which is then exported globally as a default template by the market economy. Domesticity as concealed, frictionless, and serene home life has been haunting collective and individual imaginations and conformed to the hegemony of an essentialised model rather than it accurately corresponding to lived experiences. When the nuclear family flat goes rural in China, it still draws out the boundaries of a domestic space, yet fails to confine domesticity, as evidenced by the patterns of re-appropriation enacted by rural communities. Moreover, the domestic-public distinction is constantly diffused by the everyday practice of the rural dissolved household — both through their use of spaces and the subjectivity persisted from a rural way of life. The complexities inherent in the dissolved household interweave traditional socio-cultural roots, a recent history of China's national collectivisation, and the contemporary re-appropriation and reinvention of familial forms. Derived from these complexities, the practice of rippling defies the confinement and codification of domesticity. Intrinsically socio-spatial, the state of rippling and dissolving is an elastic form of association, through which the act of mediating between genders, generations, households, neighbours, and the village community is constantly framed, and even spreads to the city through floating.³⁷ Spatially stretched from house to territory and temporally coordinated from daily to multi-year cycles, domesticity as such is untamed.

So, it penetrates. Untamed domesticity penetrates independent kinship unit by creating a vital link to the extended family, immediate neighbourhood and community, and potentially beyond. Central to the establishment of this link are non-market relations of mutual help and immediate care. In a contemporary context where market relations are forcefully extending themselves to every aspect of the social space — for instance, to dictate a practice of everyday life through consumption choices and through minimising and atomising the family — the link demonstrated by the dissolved household can be asserted as a form of rebellion. Rather than a conscious intent, strategy, or calculated outcome, rippling is above all — a practice of untamed domesticity — that unsettles fundamental assumptions about the home and its relationship to the society.

Epilogue: on China's ongoing rural regeneration

In China, design disciplines have not thought or talked about rural spatial practices until the recent ten years. The Urban and Rural Planning Law (2008) that established rural planning as a distinct planning category for the first time indeed marked a significant legal acknowledgment of the rural. However, the legal recognition of rural planning in China does not mean, yet, that, in

practice as well as in design culture, the distinct needs of the rural territory are recognised or acknowledged as being different from those of cities and addressed in the planning process. While rural architecture has gradually become topical in the field of architecture in China, there is a particular type of debate that dominates the discourse.³⁸ It sees the countryside as a new arena for architects to demonstrate their will, display their nostalgia, and moralise about their practice. The real inhabitants of the territory are still out of the spot light. This mix of interest and ignorance is exemplified by the China pavilion in the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale, themed 'Our Countryside', which showcased a collection of rural projects by celebrated Chinese architects.³⁹ This contradicts its theme — who is the 'us' here? In the way that Chinese architects enthusiastically respond to the state call for 'Building a New Socialist Countryside', an understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and political context that they must operate within is still missing.

Against this backdrop, the research calls for a rethinking of rural development as a socio-cultural process. At the very least, different forms of cultural practice of the rural inhabitants, including lifestyle, identity, mentality, and aspiration among others, must be recognised by the state, local governments, and the design profession in order to actively integrate them into the process of rural development. To reclaim rurality as a specific social, cultural, and political construct, rather than abandoning or appropriating it, is a critical position the research holds. More exactly, it is not to demarcate the rural as a closed domain, but to recognise a more in-depth reflection on the specificity of rurality as a habitus of rippling relations which opens up diverse understandings of spatial norms and lifestyles.

Along this line, it is also important to note another voice in the current rural discourse — the conservation of rural architecture with traditional features, especially those of ethnic minorities, for which the word 'vernacular' is mostly reserved. This approach operates on a fine line between preserving cultural heritage and implicitly imposing a value judgement that overlooks the thick present, in which struggles and constructive tactics of contemporary rural families are taking place in their ordinary self-built dwellings through the everyday practice. Indeed, 'ordinary things contain the deepest mysteries',⁴⁰ and the here and now is of great significance, as moments of the everyday, with tiny blows repeated over the course of time, forging social realities, perceptions, cultures, and eventually histories.

The everyday practice of rural families is incredibly lively, yet the design of domestic spaces that are to accommodate these practices is disturbingly inert. Then, for architecture as a discipline and a profession, the fundamental question is: how to understand rurality as a spatial question? Architects are often ill-equipped to address scales, systems, and relationships in the rural context due to its ambiguity in social and spatial organisation, and consequently the difficulties in seeking commonality and consistency in rural spatial practices.⁴¹ These difficulties have resulted from the mindset and skillset of the majority of architects which are shaped by and developed for the city, and ultimately rooted in the urban-biased discourse of modern architecture.

To reclaim rurality in architecture is to transcend the ontological assumptions and conceptual limitations posed by the urban domination in architecture.

In essence, rurality is an elastic form of association, both socially and spatially. The spatiality it produces hinges on a continuous process that is never crystallised and always being constructed and reconstructed by various constitutive forces; therefore, it foregrounds the particular role of architecture in shaping and reshaping social relationships. In other words, rurality puts forward an architecture of relations, one that gives form to elastic conditions in which social relations are lived.

Notes and references

1. '2020 Rural Migrant Workers Monitoring and Survey Report' ['2020年农民监测调查报告'], National Bureau of Statistics of PRC, 30 April 2021 <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202104/t20210430_1816933.html> [accessed 30 April 2020].
2. Implemented in the 1958, the hukou system has been a vital state institution for the control of labour mobility and welfare distribution, through dividing Chinese citizens into rural and urban households. An ongoing reform aims to abolish this divide in order to drive rural populations to small cities and towns and to free up a large amount of rural land, which facilitates the urbanisation of the countryside.
3. Biao Xiang, 'Suspension: Seeking Agency for Change in the Hypermobile World', *Pacific Affairs*, 94.2 (2021), 233–50.
4. A few studies have drawn similar conclusions. For example, C. Cindy Fan and Wenfei Winnie Wang, 'The Household as Security: Strategies of Rural-Urban Migrants in China', in *Migration and Social Protection in China*, ed. by Ingrid Nielsen and Russell Smyth (New Jersey, NY: World Scientific, 2008), pp. 205–43; also see Long Zhang 张龙, 'The Empty Nest Phenomenon in the Countryside and the Family Changes: An Analysis on Cao Village' ['空巢农村与家庭调试: 以草村为例'], *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)* [广西民族大学学报(哲学社会科学版)], 36.2 (2014), 49–55.
5. The 80% ratio is estimated by Xuefeng He 贺雪峰, the renowned expert on rural issues in China; see Xuefeng He, *The Chinese Path of Urbanisation* [城市化的中国道路] (Beijing: Oriental Publishing Centre, 2014), p. 108.
6. Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), p. 5.
7. Existing documentations of contemporary rural self-built houses include Lu Jiansong and Jiang Min's research on rural houses in Hunan province between 1979 and 2009 that looks into changes in materials, use of energy, and house facilities in relation to the spatial organisation, Duan Wei's morpho-typological survey of self-built houses in Xiaoshan District, Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, and Huang Huaqing's work on the factory-house type in a tea village in Fujian province. For details, please see Jiansong Lu 卢健松 and Min Jiang 姜敏, 'Change of Rural Housing from 1979 to 2009: Case Study on Hunan Investigation' ['1979–2009年农村住宅的变化: 以湖南的调研为例'], *Architectural Journal* [建筑学报], 10 (2009), 74–8; Duan Wei 段威, 'Made in Xiaoshan: A Research of Spontaneously-built Houses in Southern Sands Area in Xiaoshan, Zhejiang Province' ['萧山自造: 浙江萧山南沙地区当代乡土住宅的自发性建造的研究'], *Landscape Architecture* [风景园林], 12 (2015), 89–99; and Huang Huaqing 黄华青, 'Space as an Agent: Observations of Contemporary Rural Changes Based on a "Spatial Ethnographic" Approach' ['空间作为能动者: 基于"空间志"的当代乡村变迁观察'], *Architectural Journal* [建筑学报],

- 7 (2020), 14–9. It is worth noting that Lu and Jiang and Duan’s works are primarily concerned with the formal and material aspects of rural houses, while this research focuses on the socio-spatial relationship between the changing family structure and the domestic space. Huang’s spatial ethnography shares similar methodological concerns with this research, while the subject of study is different, as Huang’s work examines the socio-spatial impacts of the production and consumption of tea in rural villages.
8. Wilbur Schramm, *Notes on Case Studies of Instructional Media Project* (Stanford, CA: Inst. for Communication Research, Stanford University, December 1971), p. 6.
 9. The data on Liu brothers’ family status and the survey plan of their houses reflected the situation of the family in 2016 and 2017.
 10. There are also logistical reasons for having kitchens and toilets detached from the main building. Ventilation and water supply are easier and cheaper to install in simple flanking buildings, and kitchen waste can feed livestock and human waste can be composted for agricultural use; therefore, it is more convenient to manage and recycle this waste when the kitchens and toilets are separate from the main living space.
 11. Taking the house survey of Liu brothers’ family initially done in 2016 and 2017 as a reference point, I have been following ongoing modifications carried out by family members over the years.
 12. The oracle-bone inscription of the Chinese character *jia* 家, the word for family and home, has a distinct spatial feature: the iconic shape of a shelter and an animal, normally recognised as a pig under a roof. This ideogram indicates an initial definition of a ‘household’: all family members live under the same roof and possess the (shared) means of production.
 13. The three rights of a rural hukou are: the contracted land use right, the house site use right, and the collective income distribution right.
 14. See, for example, C. Cindy Fan, ‘Flexible Work, Flexible Household: Labour Migration and Rural Families in China’, in *Work and Organizations in China after Thirty Years of Transition*, Research in the Sociology of Work, vol. 19, ed. by Lisa A. Keister (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2009), pp. 377–408.
 15. See Yunxiang Yan, ‘Intergenerational Intimacy and Descending Familism in Rural North China’, *American Anthropologist*, 118.2 (2016), 244–57; and Erin Elizabeth Thomason, ‘Obligated to Care: Rural Chinese Families, Migration, and the Changing Intergenerational Contract’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, UCLA, 2017).
 16. For Bourdieu, the field of power is the field that all others are situated within and normally subordinated to, that is, a combination of the field of economy and the field of politics.
 17. Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York, NY: New Press, 1998), p. 40.
 18. *Ibid.*, pp. 40–1.
 19. Xuefeng He calls this medium-scale structure ‘middle farmer’; see He, *The Chinese Path of Urbanisation*, p. 113.
 20. For Liu brothers’ family, the dimensions of their main family yard were determined by the number of round tables they need for family reunions, typically during the Spring Festival or Qingming Festival. This detail attests to the yard as a space for family rituals. Ritual activities, such as family reunions, weddings, baby showers or funerals, create a sense of unity for family members on the one hand, and demonstrate hospitality to fellow villagers on the other. The yard weaves together the social fabric of village life, reconnecting social relations and demonstrating family fortune and power. Rituals that occur at the village level can also occur in family yards. For example, during the celebration of the end of the Spring Festival and the start of a new year in Jiangjiawan natural village, within the Shigushan administrative village, a Buddha statue tours the village to be briefly greeted by

- each household in their yard by fire crackers. This exemplifies how the family yard extends beyond the domestic sphere and becomes part of a communal village structure.
21. Along the main street in Shigushan village, a few houses were built around the 2000s to accommodate more diverse functions in addition to that of a domestic space, such as small shops and mah-jong rooms open to the village. During my visits, I observed that when a few houses of this kind are in close proximity, the street space in front becomes a common living room of the village, where kids play, adults chat and people bring their own stools to sit and eat together.
 22. See 'The Planning of the New Rural Community in Zhaishan Village, Xinzhou District, Wuhan City' published on the official Xinzhou government website in September 2014. The document is no longer accessible online.
 23. The Xinhai Revolution marked the end of China's imperial era. The Republic of China was established in the following year in 1912.
 24. Doborach Davis and Steven Harrell, 'Introduction: The Impact of Post-Mao Reforms on Family Life', in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. by Doborach Davis and Steven Harrell (Berkeley, CA, and London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 1–22.
 25. Housing commodification in China was a long process. It started in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping's 'Four Modernisations' were launched and went through several stages as marketisation intensified during the 1980s and 90s. Around the turn of the century, housing commodification had more or less pervaded the entire country.
 26. See William J. Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York, NY: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 6; and William J. Goode, *The Family* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, and London: Prentice-Hall, 1982).
 27. As part of the imperatives of modernisation, the structure of the nuclear family remains temporary, extending only as far as the duration of a parent-child relationship, which ends when the child becomes independent and goes on to form a new nuclear family of his/her own. This is in sharp contrast to the traditional structure of family with multiple and overlapping care relations, which hinges on continuity in order to fulfil a far wider range of tasks in social life in addition to reproduction. As a result of being an atomised social unit, the modern family is unable to complete the cycle of production and consumption on its own, thus made dependent on the market as well as the state apparatus.
 28. Jordan Sand, 'Domesticating Domesticity', in *House and Home in Modern Japan: Architecture, Domestic Space, and Bourgeois Culture, 1880–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2005), pp. 21–54 (p. 21).
 29. Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighbourhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2000), p. 3.
 30. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Physical Space, Social Space and Habitus', lecture transcript (Oslo: Institutt for sosiologi og samfunnsgeografi, Universitetet i Oslo, October 1996), p. 12.
 31. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. xix.
 32. *Ibid.*, pp. xii–xiii.
 33. Regarding everyday resistance, the focus of the discussion here is on the activities and actions, or in short, the practice, rather than whether or not a political consciousness to confront the power is involved. Also on this basis, the paper draws more on Michel de Certeau's notion of tactics instead of James C. Scott's classic theory on everyday resistance, which privileges intention and derives from contexts of class struggles.
 34. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 169–75.

35. Pierre Bourdieu, *Algeria 1960: Essays by Pierre Bourdieu*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 85–6.
36. Irene Cieraad, 'Introduction: Anthropology at Home', in *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, ed. by Irene Cieraad (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), pp. 1–12.
37. Tactics of self-organisation by rural migrant workers in cities have been well studied. For example, Xiang Biao's classic study on the migrant village Zhejiangcun in Beijing insightfully illustrates how rural migrants create their own 'rooted' and 'territorialised' space in the urban context; see Biao Xiang, *Transcending Boundaries: Zhejiangcun: The Story of a Migrant Village in Beijing*, trans. by Jim Weldon (Leiden; Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005); and Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Re-configuration of Space, Power and Social Networks Within China's Floating Population* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).
38. This is evidenced by the springing up of special issues on rural architecture and design in mainstream architectural journals in China since around the turn of 2010s. See, for example, collection of articles in specific issues of journals: *Architectural Journal [建筑学报]* no. 12 of 2013 presented the theme of 'Architectural Way to Deal with the Rural Change' ['乡村蜕变下的建筑因应']; *Architectural Journal [建筑学报]* no. 8 of 2016 featured 'Exploration and Practices of the Patterns of Rural Construction' ['乡建模式的探究与实践']; special issue of *Time Architecture [时代建筑]* no. 3 in 2015 focused on 'From Rural to Country: Rural Reconstruction in Contemporary China' ['从乡村到乡土: 当代中国的乡村建设']; and special issue of *The Architect [建筑师]* no. 183 in October 2016 examined the theme of 'Country Revival' ['乡村复兴'].
39. Though the English title is 'Building a Future Countryside', the literal translation of the exhibition title in Chinese is in fact 'Our Countryside' ['我们的乡村'].
40. Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (London: Architectural Association, 1997), p. 56.
41. Cole Roskam, 'Inventing the Rural: A Brief History of Modern Architecture in the Countryside', *Architectural Design*, 86.4 (2016), 14–9.

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Gao (since 2021 and on-going) and Yunshi Zhou (2021). The latest development is supported by the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts (2022–2023) towards a transdisciplinary framework — at the intersection of architecture, anthropology, performance, and filmmaking — concerning the articulation of non-discursive, bodily knowledge, and how to make it perceived and felt (project site: rrr.network). Throughout the process, the research has benefited tremendously from exchanges with my PhD supervisors Dr Pier Vittorio Aureli (Architectural Association) and Prof. Sam Jacoby (Royal College of Art), as well as sociologist Prof. Xuefeng He (Wuhan University) and anthropologist Prof. Biao Xiang (Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology) among many others. Last but not least, the paper would not reach its current state without editor Dr Doreen Bernath for her push for the conceptual proposition, rigorous editing, and immense patience.