



A house before (inset) and after renovation in a village in Zhejiang Province. Wang Yong's vision always includes the original inhabitants and some type of agricultural scenario for them, even if it's just some garden spaces to plant vegetables for their own consumption. — Ti Gong



# SHANGHAI ARCHITECT

## spearheads rural revitalization effort

Yao Minji

A little child stares curiously at the geometric images that are reflected on the ground from a wall and a roof in a remote mountain village.

"I don't get it, but they look nice," the transfixed child tells his mother.

The unusual setting that caught the fascination of the little child is in the village of Tengdai in Zhejiang Province.

There is a reason for it being there. The village happens to be the birthplace of Su Buqing (1902-2003), former president of Fudan University who's regarded as Asia's best geometer.

And the creator who gave the village its distinct new identity is Wang Yong, a Shanghai-based architect and university professor.

When Wang first visited Tengdai in 2010, there were

few villagers left. Young farmers had left to work in cities, leaving the elderly and children behind.

The former home of Su had been turned into a memorial, but the rest of the village was run-down and deserted.

The makeover has given a buzz to the village, and Wang is excited by the promise of a colorful tapestry of life.

"The village is greatly revitalized now," says Wang. "There are a lot of shops and visitors are pouring in, especially on weekends."

"It'll get even better," says the 57-year-old architect, who graduated from Tongji University in Shanghai and did his master's at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

Wang's initiation into rural development projects began with a natural disaster that rocked China in 2008. Following the Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan Province, he was

approached by a university classmate who sought his assistance in replanning and rebuilding the earthquake-damaged villages.

"I was shocked," Wang says. "I'd visited rural China as a tourist, including some villages in Sichuan, but that's not the same as the remote mountain villages with no tourism."

There was no planning. The villagers built their own homes, many of which were dilapidated and had poor sanitary conditions. It was worse and more challenging than Wang had imagined, with little money to make. But Wang was drawn to it.

"Because you know what you're doing is really making a difference in people's lives," he says. "What could be more rewarding than that?"

Over the next 10 years, Wang was frequently referred to by colleagues and classmates who had till then been preoccupied

with more profitable urban projects.

The architect and construction engineer is also head of the Department of Environmental Design at the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology. Over the last 14 years, he has done overall or partial planning for nearly 200 villages.

The property boom in Wang's heydays offered ample opportunities to young architects in the country, but he was not stirred up by it.

"I was not drawn to quick apartment projects that can be easily copied anywhere in the country," Wang says.

"Cultural projects, such as museums or historical structures, have always piqued my interest. I was interested in rural development because, as an architect, you should be aware of larger social issues, but I had never worked on a rural project before 2008. Back

then, there weren't many rural projects that would reach a Shanghai architect."

Many of his designs were never implemented or took years to complete due to a lack of interest or financial support. All that changed after "rural revitalization" became a critical component of the Chinese government's 2020-2025 work plan.

The Rural Revitalization Promotion Law came into effect in June 2021. It led to the creation of a harvest festival for farmers and an effort to improve the rural revitalization assessment system. It has also set rules for protecting farmland and educating farmers on farming, as well as a system for relocating farmers and giving them funds to help the environment.

Wang worked on 35 projects in 2020 alone. Village and county officials contacted him as investment from both