



Wang Yong (in black), a 57-year-old architect, has done overall or partial planning for nearly 200 villages over the last 14 years. — Ti Gong



An installation featuring geometric images, created by Wang, is a tribute to geometer Su Buqing in Tengdai Village, which is Su's hometown. — Ti Gong

the public and private sectors suddenly increased. He and his students are much sought after now as thousands of Chinese villages are undergoing or awaiting “revitalization.”

“Rural villages in Zhejiang Province have already improved significantly. In the more developed villages, you can pretty much enjoy everything that you find in a city — car-hailing, takeout, café, milk tea — so I do see some people coming back from cities,” says Chen Sisi, who hails from Zhejiang and has just completed her master’s degree.

“I’d return if I could open a clothing store in a village and earn a steady income.”

Chen grew up in a mountainous village in the late 1990s and early 2000s before her family relocated to the city.

Wang believes that talking with villagers and listening to their needs is an important part of his research before designing.

“Most Chinese villagers want fashionable urban life, which is why many want to move to cities or build so-called American- or European-style villas. To them, owning such a villa entails living a modern lifestyle,” he says.

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Architect

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Zhang Xinyi, a second-year master’s student who went on a field trip with Wang last year in Zhejiang, says: “Villagers all know professor Wang very well now because it takes years and many visits to do one project.”

The Shanghai native now clearly understands why “rural revitalization” is needed for villagers, while previously dismissing it as just a concept on paper.

“They surround us when we take measurements and check out the houses. They tell us about their demands, from which parts of the houses are run-down to their ideal life,” Zhang says.

“And we are making a change — from fixing their houses and securing their messed-up electric lines to digging out economic potential so that they don’t have to leave for cities to work. The latter part is especially challenging and requires a different, tailor-made approach for each village.”

For Zhang, “it will be more satisfactory if it is achieved,” even if it means making trips in 40-degree Celsius weather.

A case in point is Fenglin Village in Zhejiang. It was Zhang’s first field trip. The renovations have achieved desired results, and young villagers who had left for cities are gradually returning home.

But Wang sounds a cautionary note.

“I’m now concerned there might be an influx of too much investment too suddenly,” he says, noting how a contractor rented an over 100-year-old house from a villager immediately after it was renovated. The contractor uses the refurbished house as his office and has bigger plans for the rented house.

Wang welcomes the return of people, both new and old, because “ultimately you need people to vitalize a place,” but he is wary of the impact of capital while some of his colleagues welcome it.

Many Chinese rural developers have encountered a mismatch between villagers’

desire for urban life and designers’ desire to adhere to rural Chinese aesthetics. The streetlight debate in 2014 between curator Ou Ning and Harvard University PhD graduate Zhou Yun epitomizes this mismatch.

In 2011, Ou launched a rural utopia project in Anhui Province’s Bishan Village, with the goal of attracting artists and intellectuals to build a community and improve the quality of life for locals.

Zhou visited the village in 2014 and inquired why there was still no streetlight in the village. It seemed that the villagers wanted streetlights, but the intellectuals argued that the lights would ruin the country feel.

Ou denied it, but it sparked a series of discussions about what the villagers truly required. Rural developers have tried a variety of approaches to address the mismatch. Some simply relocate all of the original residents to newly constructed apartment buildings and completely redesign the village. Others attempt to strike a balance between the interests of the original villagers and the newcomers.

Wang’s vision always includes the original inhabitants and, preferably, some type of agricultural scenario for them, even if it’s just some garden spaces to plant vegetables for their own consumption.

According to Wang, the streetlight debate isn’t a big deal.

“We have enough technology to deal with both — you can have lights that don’t interfere with watching stars,” he says. “However, there are times when you need to find a good way to communicate with villagers in order to persuade them to abandon their pursuit of what’s ‘most fashionable.’”

“It’s beyond urban, it’s like the lights in the most crowded nightclub,” Wang says of an incident in which his designed dim lights were implemented into purplish club lighting. “But the villagers like it because they think it’s ‘fashionable,’ their ideal urban style. As a result, rural revitalization goes beyond the scope of an architect or even an urban planner.”

“We need rural management talent who are committed to working there for years,” he adds.

Looking back at that curious child from Tengdai Village, a thought crosses the mind of one of the young team members: What if he grows up to be a mathematician like Su Buqing? “It might sound stupid,” says Wang, with a certain sanguineness.

“However, the thought that what you are doing right now might have an impact on someone makes me immensely happy.”