

# Dutch researcher explores the future of rural China with his feet

Yao Minji

**D**utch urban planner Harry Den Hartog is sometimes offered the use of a car when he invites local Chinese to walk with him in their hometowns. Why walk when you can drive?

“I really have to convince them that the purpose of the walk is to slow down and get closer to our natural and social surroundings, so that we can discover new values,” he explained, a month into his weekly field research trips to China’s rural areas.

Shanghai Daily was among the guests on a recent walk with him along an ancient route in the mountains near the city of Ningbo in Zhejiang Province. It included part of a steep mountain and villages at its foot.

Senior residents enjoying an afternoon of chess in one village’s community center were surprised to see the foreigner in a place not frequented by tourists.

“What are you doing here?” asked one of the villagers. “Come join us for a game.”

Such is the serendipity of encountering locals that Den Hartog values most. His weekly trips to the heart of rural villages is part of a research project exploring rural and regional revitalization strategies through walking.

The project is led by Zef Hemel, a spatial planner and professor at Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. Den Hartog holds a research position there.

## Interdisciplinary research

The interdisciplinary research is intended to explore spatial redevelopment and revitalization of rural regions in the Netherlands through practical experience and field trips of getting to know an area and its people.

Den Hartog founded the Urban Language Studio in 2004 in Rotterdam. In its early years, it did research on the transformation of the Dutch rural landscape. His search for rural language took him to Asia, and most specifically to China. In 2012, he joined the faculty of Tongji University’s College of Architecture and Urban Planning in



Harry Den Hartog (left) takes a selfie with engineer Jerry Zhao as they walk and climb in villages between Pujiang and Tonglu in Zhejiang Province, Zhao’s hometown. — Harry Den Hartog



The Dutch researcher most values such encounters with locals. — Yao Minji

Shanghai.

What captures his attention is how Chinese cities and villages are undergoing a transformation. He said he wants to understand — with his mind and his feet — what future awaits the countryside in China and in the Netherlands.

“I’ve read and heard a lot about China’s rural revitalization and about

successful outcomes, especially in the Yangtze River Delta, in Zhejiang,” he said. “The success is not only in a commercial sense, but also in an ecological and sustainability sense.”

He explained, “I want to get down there, experience with my own eyes and feet, talk to the locals, and find out why there is success and whether we can



Encounter with a ... strawman!  
— Yao Minji

borrow some of these strategies in the Netherlands.”

Rural revitalization in China emerged as a state strategy in 2017. Government authorities, architects and academics have long explored different methods to make the countryside life attractive, sustainable and comfortable.

In the last few weeks, the Dutch scholar has walked with all kinds of local people — farmers, an engineer, an entrepreneur, a sports instructor, a developer, a curator, a photographer and a scientist, among others.

Their footsteps have crossed the northern part of Zhejiang around Tonglu and Pujiang, as well as Shanghai’s Chongming Island and Qingpu District.

“We have similar problems in the Netherlands,” said Den Hartog, whose family once lived on farms. “Young people are less willing than their parents to become farmers, and some farmers for various reasons have left the land.”

According to Reuters reports, Dutch farmers have staged protests against government plans to limit nitrogen emissions. Many farmers say the environmental policies are too rushed and will endanger their farms and the nation’s food production.

Regeneration and revitalization in urban and rural areas have long been a research interest of Den Hartog. His 2006 Dutch book entitled “Exurbia — Living Outside the City” explores the challenge of population shifts from inner cities to the countryside.

“I see some of that in today’s young Chinese, too, especially in Shanghai, where they are attracted to live and