



## Green Shoots of Revival: Political Leadership and the Differentiation of Space in a “Zero Pollution Village” in Rural Zhejiang, China

Neil Munro, Nai Rui Chng & Lu Chen

To cite this article: Neil Munro, Nai Rui Chng & Lu Chen (2023): Green Shoots of Revival: Political Leadership and the Differentiation of Space in a “Zero Pollution Village” in Rural Zhejiang, China, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, DOI: [10.1080/10455752.2023.2178945](https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2023.2178945)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2023.2178945>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 20 Feb 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Green Shoots of Revival: Political Leadership and the Differentiation of Space in a “Zero Pollution Village” in Rural Zhejiang, China

Neil Munro <sup>a</sup>, Nai Rui Chng<sup>a</sup> and Lu Chen<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

## ABSTRACT

This article uses a case study of a “Zero Pollution Village” (ZPV) initiative in Zhejiang, China, to illustrate how the Chinese state attempts to achieve rural revitalisation by harnessing the principles of uneven and combined development (UCD) and relying on the leadership of returned migrants known as “country sages” (乡贤, *xiangxian*). The ostensible goals of the initiative are to improve solid waste management and develop ecotourism, creating a model suitable for replication elsewhere. Village residents and the “country sages” aim to maximise returns on human, natural, social, and material resources at the scale of the village and household. The case shows how UCD can become a driver of both positive and negative changes which are manipulated by the state in pursuit of hybrid capitalist-socialist development. The research is based on research visits and follow-up interviews from 2019 to 2022.

**KEYWORDS** Uneven and combined development (UCD); eco-tourism; solid waste management; rural development

## Introduction

This study demonstrates how the co-development of solid waste management and ecotourism in rural China can be understood as an instance of uneven and combined development (UCD) relying on local state support and the leadership of returned migrants known as “country sages” (乡贤, *xiangxian*). Focusing on one case, “Chrysanthemum Village”<sup>1</sup> in rural Zhejiang, which has carried out a “Zero Pollution Village” (ZPV) initiative,<sup>2</sup> our

**CONTACT** Neil Munro  Neil.Munro@glasgow.ac.uk  School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Adam Smith Building Bute Gardens, Glasgow G12 8RT, UK

<sup>1</sup>All personal and place names are pseudonyms, to protect confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup>We acknowledge the physical reality that no human community can ever emit zero pollution. When we use the label “zero pollution village” (零污染村, *ling wuran cun*) we are echoing but not endorsing a slogan invented by Chinese officials.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

analysis captures the developmental dynamics underpinning the village's transformation into a tourist destination. The initiative inspired county, municipal and provincial officials to promote the village as a model project. The case exemplifies how the revitalisation of a community can be explained by UCD in China's countryside, provided that the local state lends its support and "country sages" are available to lead the project.

Our case study shows how the description of the production of space under capitalism as articulated by Neil Smith (2008) can explain an instance of revitalisation in a village which had previously been in decline. We highlight the uneven and combined nature of this development and show its relationship to local political leadership. We find that the improvements in solid waste management and tourism associated with the ZPV were driven by a process through which the government redistributed capital<sup>3</sup> in order to connect the village to the wider economy, thereby creating opportunities for capital accumulation within and beyond the village, and, as a corollary, contributing to class differentiation, as investors took advantage of a limited number of opportunities.

The next section reviews the literature relevant to the study. We then describe our approach and develop five themes in our description of Chrysanthemum Village – obsolescence of assets relating to old modes of production, appearance of new development opportunities, differentiation of space, village education and culture and political leadership. We analyse the case with reference to the theory of UCD and reflect on its broader implications.

## Literature Review

### *Uneven and Combined Development in China*

Trotsky's (1932, 1969) theory of UCD has been refined and developed by Marxist scholars studying the spatial and dynamic characteristics of capitalism (Smith 2008; Lefebvre, Brenner, and Elden 2009; Davidson 2018a, 2018b). In *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*, Neil Smith (2008, 122f) defines uneven development as "the concrete manifestation of the production of space under capitalism." UCD draws our attention to the fact that not only does capitalism develop at different speeds in different places, but also that these different stages combine with one another to produce new social structures (Davidson 2018b, 303; Rosenberg and Boyle 2019, 34–38). Smith points out UCD's cyclical nature, according to which movement of capital from areas with low rates of profit to those

---

<sup>3</sup>We follow Harvey (2018, 95) in using the term "capital" to mean "value 'in motion' undergoing a continuous expansion through the production of surplus value." This means that the form of capital is fluid rather than fixed.

with high rates of profit takes on a spatial dimension (Smith 2008, 152f). Capital constantly moves “in an attempt to exploit the opportunities of development without paying the costs of underdevelopment” (Smith 2008, 198). Smith (2011, 262) also points out the “mutuality” of capital, space and nature, and their relation to scale. He agrees with Polanyi (2001, 76) that space is just subdivided nature, but he goes on to argue that space is deliberately “produced” at different scales through labour, in order to differentiate one space from another, a step which is essential to its commodification. The tendency of capital to seek the highest rate of profit means that “regional economies are never closed” (Harvey 2018, 361), but nevertheless there can be “territorially based alliances” between different kinds of capitalists, the local state or different classes in defence of accumulation and reproduction of labour within a certain territory (Harvey 2018, 362), providing the basis for notions of “community harmony” and national solidarity (Harvey 2018, 364), and leading to patterns of regional boom and decline (Harvey 2018, 370).

The theory has been applied to explain China’s development in general terms. Dunford, Gao, and Liu (2021) use a series of *longue-durée* vignettes from Chinese history to demonstrate that UCD requires us to examine not just internal mechanisms of change but also causal mechanisms resulting from the interaction of multiple unevenly developed societies. Cartier (2013) shows how China has ridden movements of capital to help the eastern seaboard “get rich first,” thus leading state-sponsored development and creating or recreating “core–periphery” relations with the rest of the country. Hardy (2017) describes China’s integration into the global political economy in the Reform Era with reference to “primitive accumulation” and converting an agrarian into an industrial workforce. Davidson (2018b, 328) argues that China “is currently experiencing uneven and combined development in its most intense form.” He links this to the movement of excess labour from the countryside to the cities, the channelling of foreign and overseas Chinese capital, and the devolution of power to municipal levels, including the power to commandeer rural land in the service of development.

China has become a mainly urban society with villages in decline. Beginning in the early 1990s Chinese policies favoured the accumulation of urban capital, leading to the destruction of rural industry and the beginning of the migrant labour phenomenon. The abolition of agricultural taxes in 2006 further starved village and township governments of revenue, making them dependent on higher levels (Smith 2010). As the supply of “surplus” labour in the countryside diminished through the ageing of the workforce, firms found that they had to allow migrants to settle in cities close to places of production, either by persuading governments to loosen the requirements for residence registration (户口, *hukou*), or by relocating their industries to inland cities with fewer restrictions on settlement (Yang

and Gallagher 2017, 161). This change further accelerated the depopulation of villages, and it meant that much out migration was now on a permanent basis. The result was that villages became smaller, and some were demolished. Collins (2010, 260) shows that at the scale of a single city, UCD produces both physical and social infrastructures in such a way that the poor are subject to environmental risk, while the rich are insulated and enjoy a better quality of life. These insights provide a critical perspective from which to interpret the phenomenon of “dirty, chaotic and inferior” (脏乱差, *zang luan cha*) villages in China. These are places which have found themselves at the “wrong” end of UCD, where successive generations of policies have sapped resources, to the point where outsiders perceive such villages as hopeless communities.

Since the introduction of the New Socialist Countryside initiative in 2006, the Chinese government has sought ways to mitigate rural decline (Ahlers and Schubert 2015, 379–381). Responding to political need, “Model villages served as showcases for successful policy implementation to boost the cadres’ legitimacy” (Ahlers and Schubert 2009, 55). In the 1960s and 1970s, Dazhai was celebrated as an example of the “mass line” carried out “in such a way that it enhanced solidarity, enthusiasm and... awareness of social goals” and fulfilled the function of “mobilising and strengthening community power in relation to higher political or bureaucratic authorities” (Meisner 1978, 30). In the early 1980s, Xiaogang village, Anhui province, was celebrated as the first village to go over to the Household Responsibility System (HRS) in agriculture (Eckholm 1998). Model villages represent a continuation of the tradition of finding and celebrating exemplary communities.

However, as pointed out by Thøgersen (2011, 219), “In such villages the positive changes are, of course, obvious, as success is the precondition for becoming a model, and as models receive extra government support.” There is also a strong tendency among officials to select already prosperous villages. This is an outcome of cadres’ need to attain relatively quick results in order to please their superiors, and also the co-finance requirements, which price the poorer villages out of the “market” (Rosenberg 2015, 28, 34). Even though there are consultations with village representatives to select projects and villagers sometimes contribute funds, the system is run from the top down (Ahlers and Schubert 2009, 36, 56). Province-wide regulations in Zhejiang abolished model villages in 2008, instead emphasising model projects that extend across a number of villages (Ahlers and Schubert 2009, 55).

A group of non-state actors has emerged who appear motivated to help push rural regeneration forward. The so-called “country sages” (乡贤, *xiang-xian*) are often natives of the place where they live, who have spent time in urban areas and have returned to play roles in governance (Fu 2016; Li 2015; Xu 2014). The term evokes Confucian literati who used to guide the local peasants in morality and help to maintain social order. Faith in hierarchy

and notables are hallmarks of conservatism (Wallerstein and Boyarin 2004, 62), but what is remarkable about the country sages is that they complement the role of the state as the driving force in rural economies. We return to our discussion of them below, but for now it is necessary to discuss two further aspects of context which are relevant, solid waste management and ecotourism.

### ***Solid Waste Management in Rural China***

Producers seek externalisation of the costs of production, including through dumping of waste (Wallerstein and Boyarin 2004, 48), and the state responds only when social costs are felt (Wallerstein and Boyarin 2004, 82). Recycling of municipal waste and other “green” policies are thus a countervailing force to capitalism premised on ecological destruction (O’Connor 1998, 194).

Solid waste management (SWM) is one of the problems facing parts of rural China. Depending on the region, between 30% and 60% of solid waste is dumped, and in 2012, random dumping contaminated about 100,000 square kilometres of land (Wang et al. 2018, 294). In 2011, rural domestic waste exceeded 200 million tonnes, and the composition of such waste increasingly resembled that of urban areas (Ma, Hipel, and Hanson 2018, 34f). The sanitary disposal rate was only 13.96% in 2015, with much of the rest dumped on farmland or along the banks of rivers (Ma, Hipel, and Hanson 2018, 35). Rural Chinese are willing to take part in appropriate waste management and recycling when such services are available, although enthusiasm varies according to income and exposure to safe disposal messages (Han et al. 2019; Ma, Hipel, and Hanson 2018). Generally, women are more assiduous in waste sorting or collection (Li 2019; Chen and Hansen 2022).

Existing studies suggest that SWM varies according to geography, stage of development and political context. “Designated dumping” has been shown to be negatively related to distance from the dump and village size and positively related to per capita income and education (Wang et al. 2018, 298). Ma, Hipel, and Hanson (2018, 36) found that residents were more willing to follow regulations or policies if enforced by the government. It appears that government-funded SWM has been quite successful in some places.

### ***Rural Tourism in China***

Integrated urban-rural approaches to development imply a practical understanding of UCD, which has enabled local communities to search for an appropriate niche in the broader regional economy, including tourism (Marsden, Yu, and Flynn 2011; Jiang, Yang, and Bai 2018; Li et al. 2019). So-called “all-for-one” tourism integrates different developmental

approaches (Jiang, Yang, and Bai 2018). Successful regions have developed clusters of complementary production and consumption activities involving investment in infrastructure, renewable energy and recycling, cash crops, rural culinary experiences and overnight stays (农家乐, *nong jia le*) (Marsden, Yu, and Flynn 2011). The success of a region as a tourist destination has been found to depend not just on natural beauty and cultural heritage but also on the ways in which assets are managed and marketed (Tao et al. 2019; Xu et al. 2020; Li, Mi, and Zhang 2020; Tritto 2018). Commodification of heritage involves capital accumulation, mostly to the benefit of local government and its ruling elites (Su 2015). Rural innovation relies on socio-economic networks comprising institutional and management innovations alongside technology (Yin, Chen, and Li 2019). Meanwhile, regions lacking innovation systems have struggled with the effects of UCD, as very fast urbanisation has exacerbated inequality and depopulation (Gong et al. 2019).

Chinese geographers recognise that development involves spatio-temporal transformations involving changes in land use, movements of population and development of industry (Ma et al. 2019). It is considered crucial in this transformation that urban and rural areas are treated as parts of a whole. Multiple forms of secondary and tertiary industry emerge to supplement agriculture, and individual villages either urbanise completely, find their own niche, or enter terminal decline (Li et al. 2019). The notion of integration chimes with the “combined” element of the theory of UCD. However, Chinese geographers rarely mention UCD, even though it is implicit in their approach to rural revitalisation.

From this brief overview of three different literatures, on UCD in relation to China, SWM in rural areas and the development of rural tourism, we can draw three conclusions. First, UCD is a useful way to understand how China has developed in recent decades but has rarely been applied at the scale of the village. Second, poor SWM in rural areas is symptomatic of the draining of human, economic and social resources. Third, revitalisation strategies are built around the idea of returning capital by exploiting the “advantages of backwardness” – including through the development of tourism. The following case study illustrates how UCD constitutes a necessary condition for rural revitalisation, but it also needs the right leadership.

## Case Themes

Chrysanthemum Village is in the mountainous hinterland of Zhejiang, benefiting from its location on a relatively unpolluted river, with woodlands and convenient access to an arterial road. As part of the ZPV initiative, a system of petty rewards has been established for “green” behaviour; planting has begun on an ecological allotment; and a new composting facility has been

built. Chrysanthemum Village has suffered from outmigration and lacks resources to repurpose its obsolescent assets. It therefore seeks to use the capital redistributed by state-funded projects to reposition itself to further pursue combined development in the local and regional economy.

We deploy an instrumental case study research design, as described by Creswell (2017, 98). To describe the case, we identify themes which represent specific issues of interest. We used mixed approaches to data gathering – interviews, direct and participant observation, document analysis, transect walks, and studying found and created images. In December 2019, we had informal conversations and a group interview with villagers as well as formal and informal interviews with the village chairperson, the county official responsible for the ZPV from the Ecology and Environment Bureau (EEB), the township propaganda department head and the leaders of a provincial geological survey team involved in the initiative. We also held informal conversations with several villagers in October 2020, and digital follow up interviews with local officials in June 2020 and in January 2022. Transect walks enabled us to build up a “sensory map” of the sights, sounds and feelings evoked by the village and two of its neighbours. They provided us with visual evidence of waves of change. We took over 130 still photographs, focusing on streetscapes and economic activities. Our photographs were intended to jog the memory rather than construct meaning. We recognise that in all photography understanding is positioned and subjective, and only a reflexive approach which examines the motives behind interpretation can afford tentative validity to our findings (Spencer 2011, 141).

Below we discuss five themes related to UCD: obsolescence of assets relating to old modes of production, the appearance of new development opportunities, differentiation of space, village education and culture, and political leadership.

### ***Obsolescence of Assets Relating to Old Modes of Production***

Traces of obsolescent assets afford us a view of the direction of UCD. The small boat (解艚舟, *zemengzhou*) transportation industry is the focus of a museum which the county government built in the village on the banks of the river. According to the exhibition materials, written records of this industry trace back to the Southern Song dynasty (thirteenth century). In the late 1950s, the county had five river transportation cooperatives with more than 900 registered boats and more than 1000 crew. The geography of the region and lack of passable roads meant the river was the best way to carry goods to and from the prefectural seat, and the shallow draft of the boats allowed them to navigate the upper reaches. The construction of better roads in the 1980s and the opening of a bridge connecting Chrysanthemum Village to this network in 1987 made the boats obsolete. The industry



had, however, survived long enough for boatwrights to be found and engaged to build several replica vessels which are berthed in front of the museum.

Signs of Chrysanthemum Village's former prosperity include several old farmhouses which are no longer homes but give character to the village. The visible timber frames, modular walls built from wood, bamboo and rammed earth, multi-inclined roofs and heaped tiles present a collage of textures and colours typical of traditional Zhejiang vernacular style (Wang, Yang, and Li 2020). According to Ju, the village chairperson (村长, *cunzhang*), the farmhouses are no longer habitable but instead used for storage. In her view, they are not worth restoring. For one thing, it is very expensive and for another the villagers do not value them. Government regulation prevents them from being torn down, and maintenance focuses on the external façade, as well as prevention of fire and accidents. Outside one of these farmhouses, the villagers have built an open hearth where people gather to sit and talk in the evenings.

Human resources in this village, as in most villages across China, are depleted by outmigration. According to Ju, workers can earn in the city double what they would in the village. The elementary school, which used to have 120-odd pupils, is closed, and the few children left travel to the township by car (5 min) or by bike (15–20 min). According to materials displayed in the village hall, the village has never had enough land to feed itself, and therefore developed a tradition of making dried noodles to barter for grain: 50 kg of noodles could buy 200 kg of grain. Racks of noodles drying in the sun make a picturesque scene. The village has contracted out its land, consisting largely of terraces, to the township government, and there is little income to be had from it.

### ***Appearance of New Development Opportunities***

Before 2014, Chrysanthemum village was in a sorry condition. It was regarded as “dirty, chaotic and inferior.” It stank, the streets were spattered with chicken, duck and dog excrement, there were flies and mosquitoes everywhere, and the pit latrines the villagers used were frequented by rats, and by snakes which fed off the rats. Ju claimed that in 2016 the average annual income in the village was 16,000 yuan, including the income of those working in urban areas. By 2019, not only had proper sewerage pipes and internal toilets been installed in all the houses, and the streets paved and cleaned up, but also annual average income had reached 30,000 yuan, and for villagers who had opened shops it was between 100,000 and 200,000 yuan.

The village had benefited from substantial local government investment. After Ju was elected as village chairperson in May 2017, she started to

renovate the village committee building and with other committee members lent some of her own money to help build a paying car park behind the museum. In 2018, under the rural revitalisation strategy, Chrysanthemum Village received 1.5 million yuan, and in 2019, it received another 0.5 million for recovery after a flood. It then became the pilot site for the ZPV. In 2020, it was enlisted by the provincial government to build an “Ecologically Habitable Village” (省级生态宜居村庄, *shengji shengtai yiju cunzhuang*), leading to the award of several million yuan once completed. It was also the only extra village added into a provincial project called the “Rural Idyll Complex” (省级田园综合体, *shengji tianyuan zongheti*), which brought another 10–12 million yuan of investment in 2020.

Improved sanitation paved the way to encourage visitors to the village. According to Ma, the township propaganda head, tourism represented the future for the northern part of this prefecture. Comprising an area of 444 square kilometres, with a population of only around 60,000, it had a low level of development not only because of its terrain, but also because it was the catchment for the municipal water supply, which led the government to ban industrial activity and animal husbandry here, with the result that the river water has been grade II (the second best category) since the early 2000s. The upper reaches of the river offered a new tourist route, with scenic hamlets, fresh air, space, and organic food. Plans for the area were framed as response to Xi Jinping’s Two Mountains concept<sup>4</sup> as well as policies on village revival and beautification.

Villagers as well as outsiders captured the economic opportunities generated by infrastructural renovation and the political goal of tourism development. According to Ju, villagers began to market and manage tourist accommodation, providing by the autumn of 2022 around 200 beds dispersed in nine hostels. On average, it cost around two to three million yuan to renovate a villager’s self-built house into a hostel. A few other native villagers retired from their urban jobs and came back to join the hostel business. There were also some private operators from outside who came to run hostels for landlords. During the tourism season of National Day in the first week of October 2022, Ju estimated that there were one to two thousand visitors each day and all the hostels were fully booked. Together with accommodation offers, the village attracted visitors with its own-brand agricultural products, marketed as genuine, fairly priced, locally specific (特色, *tese*) and healthy.

Chrysanthemum Village became a tourist hotspot (网红, *wanghong*) even before the ZPV initiative, but the initiative seems to have enhanced its competitiveness *vis a vis* its neighbours. Township, county and municipal-level

---

<sup>4</sup>Green waters and blue mountains are mountains of gold and silver (绿水青山就是金山银山, *Lüshui qingshan jiu shi jinshan yinshan*), articulated in 2013 during a visit by President Xi to Kazakhstan and subsequently written into central government policy in the form of an Opinion on Speeding Up the Construction of an Ecological Civilization (2015).

media were involved in promoting the village. Ju, who was later elected as the village party secretary in 2020, told us that she herself had around 2000 followers on social media and she actively spread information about the village.

### ***Differentiation of Space***

Against the backdrop of growing tourism, the ZPV programme in Chrysanthemum Village is an example of the differentiation and production of space. First, the ZPV chose only Chrysanthemum Village to participate in the programme. One of our transect walks took us across the causeway to the larger Peony village on the opposite side of the river. Peony is on the main road, with a huge central square surrounded by covered walkways. We took a second walk to Carnation village, on the same side of the river as Chrysanthemum Village, but further away from the bridge along a single-track road. Carnation is also bigger than Chrysanthemum Village and has a shrine and a temple on the outskirts, but no ZPV status.

ZPV status has been given material form in Chrysanthemum Village by the establishment of a number of communal facilities with prominent signage and explanations. First, as mentioned, an ecological plot has been marked off. A team of geologists from the prefectural seat, experts in soil quality, are using it to demonstrate organic farming. Second, the township has set up an organic waste processing facility which produces fertiliser from local kitchen waste. Third, on the main road leading into the village, a waste sorting and recycling machine have been installed. Villagers can earn points by putting the correct category of waste into the correct bins. The points can be spent in the village shop on a range of low-priced essential items such as cooking oil and toothpaste. Waste sorting and recycling facilities, and the organic waste processing facility, were set up before the ZPV and then incorporated into it, while the organic plot would probably not have been planted without the ZPV.

Practices of recycling and cleanliness are reinforced within the village by badging “Zero Pollution Households.” According to Ju, correct practices of waste sorting improve the villagers’ personal quality (素质, *suzhi*), which promotes a zest for earning money. Ju directly links environmental improvement to the development of tourism and also to the villagers’ physical health and prosperity. As of December 2019, Chrysanthemum Village had had visitors from more than 900 delegations from 20 different provinces who came to learn from its practices, including rural revitalisation.

### ***Reforming Village Education and Culture***

Ju explained that it was the fact that Chrysanthemum Village’s small boat industry had disappeared fifty years previously, and that Chrysanthemum

Village therefore “had no culture” (没有文化, *meiyou wenhua*) that made the ZPV initiative a necessity. Ju’s remark may refer to the village’s peripheral position in terms of values and achievements. The small boat museum celebrates the lives of the villagers’ ancestors, but Ju describes the building of the museum as an attempt to excavate a culture which has been dormant for 50 years. The village exhibition shows the names of the principal village clans, but the ancestral hall of the historically leading Hua clan has been incorporated first into the primary school and then, after that closed, into the village hall complex. Someone named Hua had been village chairperson for 19 of the 35 years since the restoration of the position in 1984. Although the village has its own creed, displayed in a three-character classic (三字经, *sanzijing*) in the village hall, Ju clearly feels it has not managed to preserve its traditions very well, compared to other villages.

Educating the population is a big part of the ZPV. The organic farming plot is intended to show villagers another way to farm. Signage at the organic waste recycling centre and the waste sorting machine explains how and why to recycle waste. Zero Pollution Households display a list of 10 household rules covering such matters as obeying environmental regulations, keeping the house neat and tidy, engaging in waste sorting and recycling, using biodegradable or reusable bags and utensils, choosing green consumer durables, modes of transport and cleaning products, economising on use of water and electricity, not wasting food, taking part in environmental protection activities, and using organic or low toxicity pesticides and fertilisers. Ju continually emphasises her role in teaching the villagers environmental values and clean habits.

### **“Country Sages” and Local Political Leadership**

The ZPV is the creation of an informal coalition of “policy entrepreneurs” (Hammond 2013) consisting of research institute leaders and environmental governance officials at provincial, municipal, and county levels within the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) and its subordinate departments. The interest of officials in the ZPV centres around its value as a “model project” serving environmental improvement and tourism development.

The officials have produced a handbook, published by the county branch of the municipal Ecology and Environment Bureau (EEB) and an associated NGO, summarising the elements of the ZPV and its structure. The village committee is meant to play the leading role. In the case of Chrysanthemum Village, the committee has been assisted by municipal and county environmental NGOs, the geological survey team mentioned above, and a private company. The handbook provides “guidelines” (指南, *zhinan*) for ZPVs, including lists of documents providing the statutory basis of the activities,

specific suggestions on measures to adopt and a points-based system for evaluating progress.

Our observations confirmed that vigorous leadership by the village chairperson, Ju, was essential to the initiative's success. In her dealings with the villagers, Ju displays a jovial manner, full of self-confidence. She appears to be a shrewd politician. The village has two key decision-making bodies, the village committee and the Party committee, amongst whom, Ju claims, there is a harmony of interests.<sup>5</sup> After she was elected to the post of village chairperson, she created a group of volunteers to clean up the village. She demanded that poultry be kept in pens. She had rubbish removed to make all streets passable to traffic. Some changes encountered strong resistance. According to a county-level official, the vigour with which Ju set about demolishing household latrines upset some residents to such an extent that they left human excrement on her doorstep and verbally abused her. Her adult son, living in the big city, was also unsupportive, fearing that the money she had invested in the village would go to waste. She pressed on despite these difficulties and eventually, she claims, those who resisted her came to see the benefits of her programme.

Ju claims that at the start she had not received any instructions about how to carry out her role, but she benefited from the support of the township, county, municipal and provincial officials, with whom her policies were aligned, and who encouraged her by awarding Chrysanthemum Village the status of a ZPV village and seeking to make it a model project.

## Analysis

A number of features stand out in relation to the theory of UCD. First is the extreme speed of events. After marrying into the village, Ju acquired Chrysanthemum village *hukou* registration. She and her husband built a house in the village in 2012 while still living in the county seat. In 2016, they settled in the village and one year later turned the house into a hostel. She claims to have been surprised when she was encouraged to stand for village chairperson by the previous incumbent, but once she agreed to it, she campaigned actively for the support of the township government and the villagers. The ZPV developed over the next two years. Accelerated development due to the “privilege of historical backwardness” is a feature of UCD, as is the collision of societies at different stages of development (Rosenberg and Boyle 2019, 37).

Second, Chrysanthemum Village illustrates the movement of capital “in an attempt to exploit the opportunities of development without paying the

---

<sup>5</sup>In the latest village election in 2020, the secretary of the Party committee was automatically deemed the chairperson of the village committee. Ju became the secretary and chairperson in this election.

costs of underdevelopment” (Smith 2008, 198). When Ju and her husband moved back to the village, they found a place which was “dirty, chaotic and inferior.” Being in early middle age, with experience running businesses, their return represented a substantial infusion of human resources, which further encouraged other villagers residing in urban areas to return bringing more investment. However, Ju was not simply looking for the best financial return. She spoke about the fresh air and beautiful surroundings. She seemed to take pleasure in the relationships she had built up in the village and with the officials involved in the ZPV project. Many villagers have benefited financially from the increasing integration of the village into the regional economy. They can sell side-line agricultural products or directly engage in village tourism as peddlers, store and hostel owners. The socio-economic position of villagers has become further entrenched with differentiated opportunities for investment and uneven returns.

The key question for the policy entrepreneurs promoting the ZPV is whether it can be replicated in other villages as a contribution to the revitalisation of the countryside. The question hinges on whether or not Ju is simply a one-off or whether she represents a class of persons who can be found elsewhere. The key to the success of the ZPV is that the country sages must become the vehicles for coordinating investment of physical, financial, social and political resources into the village and the consequent “revalorisation” of its depleted natural, human and cultural resources.

The expansion of the role of the country sages in rural governance is an act of “political inclusion” which is characteristic of modern states in general and has the effect of making the state more robust (Davidson 2018b, 316). In Maoist Dazhai, criticism and struggle sessions, combined with control of food rations and work points, and reduction of permissible self-expression to a narrow range of ideologically correct phrases and behaviours, combined to ensure villagers over-achieved in the pursuit of the ideal community, creating an atmosphere of fear and in some cases resulting in long-term health damage (Shu and Hua 2007, 106f). Ju practises a gentler form of leadership. Her most coercive act was the demolition of outside latrines, which resulted in strong pushback from the villagers – suggesting that what transpires is more the outcome of bargaining than diktat.

We can think of the inclusion of country sages in Gramscian terms as evidence of the Communist Party’s hegemony: its power to define and redefine social roles and ideology together with its embrace of traditional culture make the idea of country sages appear acceptable to the local people. The analogous process in the West was the legitimisation of capitalism even before the extension of suffrage to the working class, leading if not to universal support for capitalism at least to resigned compliance of it as the only form of social organisation realistically available (Davidson 2018b, 317f).

## Conclusion

We do not argue in this article that Chrysanthemum Village is “successful,” merely that it is well explained by the combination of UCD and local political leadership. Even though it is in a dependent position, it developed through the spatial flow of resources. The part of the prefecture within which Chrysanthemum Village sits includes a range of eco-tourism opportunities. So, the changes there must be seen as part of the production and differentiation of space within a larger context of regional development.

From this snapshot in one location, key elements of UCD as a driver of change are apparent. First, people, natural resources, money and materials move from sectors with a low rate of return to those with a higher rate of return. Chrysanthemum Village was difficult to access and did not attract significant rural development. This changed after the construction of the bridge which connected it to a network of other villages with important natural assets. Second, UCD is cyclical, as devalued assets become revalued and outmoded assets become repurposed. The mobilisation of villagers, especially women, in garbage sorting and other activities rewarded by the ZPV initiative, is an instance of changing human behaviour to preserve newly renovated rural landscape and even enhance its value. The maintenance of old farmhouses as scenery and the celebration of the small boat industry in a museum are instances of the repurposing of obsolete assets. Third, different levels of government try to differentiate space within their own jurisdiction in order to secure a comfortable niche in the national, regional or local economy. In carrying out the ZPV initiative, village leaders found a means to differentiate Chrysanthemum Village from its neighbours, and then to differentiate space within the village to reward desirable characteristics.

Although Chrysanthemum Village has achieved some success, there are still long-term problems to be solved, for example, distributing the benefits of ecotourism. The county official whom we interviewed again more than two years after our first visit commented that economic development there was going well but there were tensions within the village committee about the distribution of benefits. Material success for some necessarily brings differentiation.

Ju's leadership was important in brokering investments decided by higher level officials. If this village were to be replicated as a model project, the operation of UCD principles may be a necessary condition, but it is not sufficient on its own. Local political leadership at village level is also needed, and not every place is lucky enough to have its own Ju. However, the fact that country sages have been recognised as a target for political inclusion suggests that there may be some hope of replication in some places some of the time.

We acknowledge that it is difficult to reach firm conclusions based on a single case. Further research is needed to explain the relationship between political inclusion and the Chinese Communist Party's ecological civilisation construction strategy. When we asked the county-level official responsible for the ZPV what the government expects in terms of a return on its investment, he said he hoped the village would "realise the transformation of green waters and blue mountains into mountains of silver and gold" (实现绿水青山向金山银山转化, *shixian lushui qingshan xiang jinshan yinshan zhuanhua*). This seems a rather literal interpretation of Xi Jinping's two mountains theory,<sup>6</sup> but it is at least an honest acknowledgment that one of the goals is capital accumulation. We do not yet understand how ecological civilisation construction works in relation to political inclusion at larger scales. Further work is needed to understand how country sages affect other aspects of governance, including through class differentiation in access to power.

The case of Chrysanthemum Village shows how politicisation of environmental and developmental goals enabled the community to achieve a little of both. Our case emphasises the role of the party-state in facilitating such changes through the agency of the country sages, who exploit their rural ties by combining them with social, political, human and financial resources acquired or enhanced in the cities. Although leadership was crucial, both from the officials who promoted the initiative and the village chairperson who carried it out, the initiative's success depended on the principles of UCD. The case thus helps us to understand the interconnectedness of SWM, ecotourism, and the wider project of rural revitalisation in China. More generally, it shows how UCD and the role of country sages can contribute to understanding rural development and environmental change under China's hybrid capitalist-socialist system.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Universities China Committee in London and the University of Glasgow for the travel grants which made the research possible, and the editor, Professor Salvatore Engel-Dimauro, and two anonymous reviewers for help in improving the manuscript.

## Disclosure statement

Officials in China's Environment and Ecology *xitong* (system) provided administrative support for and facilitated our research as part of a collaboration relating to the Zero Pollution Village initiative, but had no input into our theoretical approach, analysis or conclusions.

---

<sup>6</sup>The thrust of Xi Jinping's two mountains theory is that "Lucid waters and lush mountains are not only examples of natural and ecological wealth, but they are also social and economic assets" (Xi 2019, 12).



## Funding

This work was supported by Universities China Committee in London and University of Glasgow.

## ORCID

Neil Munro  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9694-9701>

## References

- Ahlers, A. L., and G. Schubert. 2009. "‘Building a New Socialist Countryside’ – Only a Political Slogan?" *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 38 (4): 35–62. doi:10.1177/186810260903800403.
- Ahlers, A. L., and G. Schubert. 2015. "Effective Policy Implementation in China’s Local State." *Modern China* 41 (4): 372–405. doi:10.1177/0097700413519563.
- Cartier, C. 2013. "Uneven Development and the Time/Space Economy." In *Unequal China: The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Inequality*, edited by W. Sun, and Y. Guo, 77–90. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chen, L., and M. H. Hansen. 2022. "Gender and Power in China’s Environmental Turn: A Case Study of Three Women-Led Initiatives." *Social Sciences* 11 (97): 1–14. doi:10.3390/socsci11030097.
- Collins, T. W. 2010. "Marginalization, Facilitation, and the Production of Unequal Risk: The 2006 Paso del Norte Floods." *Antipode* 42 (2): 258–288. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00755.x.
- Creswell, J. W. 2017. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Davidson, N. 2018a. "The ‘Law’ of Uneven and Combined Development: Part 1." *East Central Europe* 45 (1): 13–38. doi:10.1163/18763308-04501002.
- Davidson, N. 2018b. "The ‘Law’ of Uneven and Combined Development: Part 2." *East Central Europe* 45 (2-3): 301–335. doi:10.1163/18763308-04502011.
- Dunford, M., B. Gao, and W. Liu. 2021. "Geography and the Theory of Uneven and Combined Development: Theorizing Uniqueness and the Return of China." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* (Advance Online Publication: 0308518X20987229).
- Eckholm, E. 1998. "Xiaogang Journal; Village of Small Farmers Marks Own Great Leap." *The New York Times*. <https://go.exlibris.link/kQbWjpWB>.
- Fu, C. 2016. "我国乡村治理模式的变迁、困境与内生权威嵌入的新乡贤治理" [The Changes, Predicaments of Rural Governance in Our Country and Governance by County Sages Embedded in Endogenous Authority]. *地方治理研究 [Local Governance Research]* 69 (01): 67–73.
- Gong, J., Y. Jian, W. Chen, Y. Liu, and Y. Hu. 2019. "Transitions in Rural Settlements and Implications for Rural Revitalization in Guangdong Province." *Journal of Rural Studies*, doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.10.037.
- Hammond, D. R. 2013. "Policy Entrepreneurship in China’s Response to Urban Poverty." *Policy Studies Journal* 41 (1): 119–146. doi:10.1111/psj.12005.
- Han, Z., D. Zeng, Q. Li, C. Cheng, G. Shi, and Z. Mou. 2019. "Public Willingness to Pay and Participate in Domestic Waste Management in Rural Areas of China." *Resources, Conservation & Recycling* 140: 166–174. doi:10.1016/j.resconrec.2018.09.018.

- Hardy, J. 2017. "China's Place in the Global Divisions of Labor: An Uneven and Combined Development Perspective." *Globalizations* 14 (2): 189–201. doi:10.1080/14747731.2016.1200264.
- Harvey, D. 2018. *The Limits to Capital*. London: Verso.
- Jiang, H., Y. Yang, and Y. Bai. 2018. "Evaluation of All-for-One Tourism in Mountain Areas Using Multi-Source Data." *Sustainability* 10 (11): 4065. doi:10.3390/su10114065.
- Lefebvre, H., N. Brenner, and S. Elden. 2009. *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Li, J. 2015. "乡村变革与乡贤治理的回归" [Rural Reform and the Return of Rural Leadership]. 浙江社会科学 [Zhejiang Social Sciences] 7: 82–87. doi:10.14167/j.zjss.2015.07.010.
- Li, B. 2019. 女性环保表现优于男性, 乡村垃圾分类比城镇做得更好 ... 生态环境部发布首份公民环境行为大数据 [Women's Environmental Behaviour is Better than Men's, Waste Sorting is Done Better in Villages than in Cities ... the Ministry of Environment and Ecology Published the First Large Scale Data on Citizens' Environmental Behaviour]. 每经网 [National Business Daily], May 31. <http://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2019-05-31/1338464.html>.
- Li, B., Z. Mi, and Z. Zhang. 2020. "Willingness of the New Generation of Farmers to Participate in Rural Tourism: The Role of Perceived Impacts and Sense of Place." *Sustainability* 12 (3): 766–791. doi:10.3390/su12030766.
- Li, H., Y. Yuan, X. Zhang, Z. Li, Y. Wang, and X. Hu. 2019. "Evolution and Transformation Mechanism of the Spatial Structure of Rural Settlements from the Perspective of Long-Term Economic and Social Change: A Case Study of the Sunan Region, China." *Journal of Rural Studies*, doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.03.005.
- Ma, L., M. Chen, F. Fang, and X. Che. 2019. "Research on the Spatiotemporal Variation of Rural-Urban Transformation and its Driving Mechanisms in Underdeveloped Regions: Gansu Province in Western China as an Example." *Sustainable Cities and Society* 50: 101675. doi:10.1016/j.scs.2019.101675.
- Ma, J., K. W. Hipel, and M. L. Hanson. 2018. "An Evaluation of the Social Dimensions in Public Participation in Rural Domestic Waste Source-Separated Collection in Guilin, China." *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* 190 (1): 1–14. doi:10.1007/s10661-017-6336-1.
- Marsden, T., L. Yu, and A. Flynn. 2011. "Exploring Ecological Modernisation and Urban – Rural Eco-Developments in China: The Case of Anji County." *Town Planning Review* 82 (2): 195–224. doi:10.3828/tp.2011.13.
- Meisner, M. 1978. "Dazhai: The Mass Line in Practice." *Modern China* 4 (1): 27–62. doi:10.1177/009770047800400102.
- O'Connor, J. 1998. "Uneven and Combined Development and Ecological Crisis." In *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism*, edited by J. O'Connor, 187–199. New York: Guilford Press.
- Polanyi, K. 2001. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Rosenberg, L. 2015. "Why Do Local Officials Bet on the Strong? Drawing Lessons from China's Village Redevelopment Program." *The China Journal* 74 (1): 18–42. doi:10.1086/681812.
- Rosenberg, J., and C. Boyle. 2019. "Understanding 2016: China, Brexit and Trump in the History of Uneven and Combined Development." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 32 (1): e32–e58. doi:10.1111/johs.12217.

- Shu, C., and L. Hua. 2007. "Des Corps qui Parlent: Travailler Beaucoup, Travailler dur » à Dazhai." *Études Rurales* 179: 95–116. doi:10.4000/etudesrurales.8447.
- Smith, N. 2008. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Smith, G. 2010. "The Hollow State: Rural Governance in China." *China Quarterly* 203 (203): 601–618. doi:10.1017/S0305741010000615.
- Smith, N. 2011. "Uneven Development Redux." *New Political Economy* 16 (2): 261–265. doi:10.1080/13563467.2011.542804.
- Spencer, S. 2011. *Visual Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Awakening Visions*. New York: Routledge.
- Su, X. 2015. "Urban Entrepreneurialism and the Commodification of Heritage in China." *Urban Studies* 52 (15): 2874–2889. doi:10.1177/0042098014528998.
- Tao, W., J. Ma, D. Wang, K. Adeyeye, and Y. Peng. 2019. "Extenics: A New Approach for the Design, Reconstruction and Renewal of Traditional Villages." *Procedia Computer Science* 162: 908–915. doi:10.1016/j.procs.2019.12.067.
- Thøgersen, S. 2011. "Building a New Socialist Countryside Model Villages in Hubei." In *Politics and Markets in Rural China*, edited by B. Alpermann, 213–297. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Tritto, A. 2018. "Environmental Policies, Strategies and Technologies in the Context of Heritage Tourism: A Comparative Case Study Analysis of Natural and Cultural World Heritage sites in China and Malaysia." PhD diss., City University of Hong Kong.
- Trotsky, L. 1932. *The History of the Russian Revolution*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Trotsky, L. 1969. *The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects*. New York: Merit Publishers.
- Wallerstein, I. M., and D. Boyarin. 2004. *World-systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wang, F., Z. Cheng, A. Reisner, and Y. Liu. 2018. "Compliance with Household Solid Waste Management in Rural Villages in Developing Countries." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 202: 293–298. doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.08.135.
- Wang, N., E. Yang, and L. Li. 2020. "Time as Space: A Comparative Analysis of Zhejiang Traditional Houses in the 1960s and 2010s." *The Journal of Architecture* 25 (1): 77–109. doi:10.1080/13602365.2020.1734047.
- Xi, Jinping. 2019. "Pushing China's Development of an Ecological Civilization to a New Stage." *Qiushi* 11 (2): 3–23.
- Xu, X. 2014. "新型社会组织参与乡村治理的机制与实践" [The Mechanism and Practice of New Social Organizations Participating in Rural Governance]." *中国特色社会主义研究* [Research on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics] 1 (4): 86–89.
- Xu, J., M. Yang, C. Hou, Z. Lu, and D. Liu. 2020. "Distribution of Rural Tourism Development in Geographical Space: A Case Study of 323 Traditional Villages in Shaanxi, China." *European Journal of Remote Sensing*, doi:10.1080/22797254.2020.1788993.
- Yang, Y., and M. Gallagher. 2017. "Moving In and Moving Up? Labor Conditions and China's Changing Development Model." *Public Administration and Development* 37 (3): 160–175. doi:10.1002/pad.1800.
- Yin, X., J. Chen, and J. Li. 2019. "Rural Innovation System: Revitalize the Countryside for a Sustainable Development." *Journal of Rural Studies*, doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.10.014.