

BREAKING THE MODE OF DEMOLITION AND RECONSTRUCTION

Taoyuan Village belongs to the “Happiness Green Village” scheme of the Western Hubei Eco-culture Tourism Circle, in Western Hubei Province, China. It is an example of how an attractive living environment can be created for rural inhabitants by repairing and promoting ancient villages, also with view to stemming the rural exodus.

By Xuesong Zhang, Ju He and Hailin Zhang

As China’s urbanisation process accelerates, the urban-rural gap is becoming more and more obvious. The cities are developing and expanding rapidly, while rural communities are gradually languishing and waning. Some villages have already disappeared, while others are set to suffer the same fate, leaving many peasant workers unable to return but also without prospects of staying in the cities.

Taoyuan Village was also in gradual decline. Just like so many others Chinese villages, it had become very shabby and impoverished, and the young peasants went out to work, while the children and the elders stayed in the rural environment. Nearly ten years ago, Taoyuan looked like a completely “empty village”. Lacking protection, the ancient buildings and old trees suffered great damage, and the village landscape was withered and tattered. The riverway was in a state of disrepair, natural ecology was on the slide, and traditional cultures were in decline.

Taoyuan Village is located in Wushengguan Town, part of Guangshui City in Hubei Province. It is at the foot of the great Wushengguan Pass, a strategic link between North and South China located in the hub of the Togbai and Dabie Mountains. Long ago, Taoyuan Village was an important commercial port with a prosperous economy. It boasts a more than 500-year-old persimmon forest as well as many historic stone buildings that are well preserved and an inscription tablet, built by the decree of Emperor Xianfeng of Qing Dynasty, to praise local filial culture.

A “GREEN HAPPINESS VILLAGE”

In October 2012, Taoyuan Village joined the first batches of “Green Happiness Village” pilots of Western Hubei Province (see Box on page 37). The construction plan, designed by the Beijing Green Cross Ecological Culture Communication Center, a non-government organisation, followed the concept of “making the countryside more like countryside”. The local government adheres to the concepts of “natural character, modern function, green in-



Retaining the original building fabric is an integral element of the green Happiness Village project.

Photo: Xuesong Zhang

dustries, civilisation & simplicity”, and actively endeavours to protect excellent Chinese rural historical and cultural elements, promote rural ecological civilisation, and build a new Chinese authentic village. Taoyuan Village was also included in the Land Remediation Project of Hubei Province in 2013. The local government seized the opportunity, encouraged public participation and completely renovated the village. It organised its functional departments in batches, to carry out field visits and learn from successful cases around Guangshui City.

Local planning and design departments co-operated with teams of experts in constantly improving project planning and gradually forming Taoyuan’s features. The Land and Resources Department of Guangshui City undertook civil engineering measures such as creating an ecological embankment of the Taoyuan River, maintaining bridges and constructing tour trails. At the same time, ancient stone houses were repaired, the village’s environment was revitalised, and the ecology was restored.

The Green Happiness Village construction of Taoyuan Village breaks with the conventional mode of demolition and reconstruction, adhering to the construction concepts of respecting the original site and original appearance,

restoring old as the old and preserving the original state of the village.

Based on respect for and complying with nature, the landscape of Taoyuan Village was remediated, with the project insisting on the priority of ecological suitability and recovery and promotion of the natural environment. Landscape elements such as topography, paths, ancient trees and stone buildings were integrated into the overall environment design.

The historical traces and cultural deposits of Taoyuan Village are borne in aspects such as buildings, folk customs and daily life. The idyllic scenery around dwellings, bright-coloured flowers and orderly croplands are unique to Taoyuan Village. In the remediation process, the elements of historical and culture traces were extracted, summarised, and integrated into the design and construction technology in order to fit in with the original ecology as well as the natural landscape.

Regarding landscape spatial allocation and construction, land remediation focused on the local culture (agriculture, dietetic culture and tourism culture), and combines farm work, festivals, folk customs, tourism, health maintenance and outward-bound training in the

landscape system. This aims to develop natural landscape and local traditional facilities as rural tourism resources.

CONSIDERING THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT AND KEEPING VILLAGERS ON BOARD

The project is not only devoted to improving the living conditions and dwelling environment of the villagers. It also enforces village construction and development. Furthermore, it is committed to satisfying the services of living and leisure as well as management and consumption requirements of participants. And it emphasises their sensorial and mental satisfaction.

Some new elements based on materials, colours, plant species, environmental protection and ecosystem are added carefully to the design. This aims to allow the landscape environment to directly reflect the original ecology and peasant lifestyle while also addressing contemporary people's behaviour and ways of thinking. The project provides a participatory landscape space, including a footpath for walks, a theme campsite, an educated youth inn and a grand quality homestay.

A careful combination of public participation and government-directed efforts was applied. The villagers were informed of the chief aspects of the planned land remediation well in advance and were encouraged to engage in decision-making and supervising. The main planning departments considered the opinions, ideas and suggestions of all parties involved in order to take full account of manoeuvrability and practicability, and also to ensure quality e.g. in road or sanitary installation construction.

The total investment budget of Taoyuan Village construction is about 30–50 million renminbi (RMB), the equivalent of 3.4–7.8 million US dollars. By June 2016, more than 37.8 million RMB had already been spent via the diversification of investment and financing channels. Part of investing was guided by the government, although the principal share of finance was provided via the land remediation fund and market enterprises.

DEVELOPING NEW INCOME OPPORTUNITIES

In order to promote rural industrial upgrading and income increase of peasants, already estab-

lished Taoyuan Villager Cooperatives are actively invited to engage in the implementation of land remediation. On the basis of voluntary participation, the villagers are establishing an industrialisation commonwealth, a “community of interests”, vigorously developing stock breeding, crop farming, rural tourism and agrotechnology and becoming shareholders, mountain-contracting rights, real estate, etc. The industrial restructuring was combined with land remediation, and the villagers were encouraged to develop a green industry. The village's “532” industrial structure means that the percentage of newly developed industry such as tourism industry is 50 per cent, that of traditional industry including environmentally sustainable stock breeding, organic rice and vegetable farming accounts for 30 per cent and industry supporting for new developed industry constitutes 20 per cent.

SAFEGUARDING THE INTERESTS OF ALL PARTIES IS KEY

Land remediation requires the support of enterprises and industry. The project has attracted a lot of enterprises seeking to develop ecological tourism – e.g. sightseeing, local family food, a family inn – and ecological agriculture.

THE GREEN HAPPINESS VILLAGE PROJECT

The construction of “Green Happiness Villages” is a new model of socialist rural development advocated by Hubei Provincial Development Strategic Planning Office in 2012. The model is aimed at avoiding irreversible destruction of the original ecological village inherited from the western Hubei region over thousands of years and sharing responsibility for the preservation of China's long history of farming civilisation. Villagers and other citizens are encouraged to experience and enjoy the village.

Villagers are guided in developing their own ecological environment and local style, establishing self-organisation and self-management and grafting modern civilisation organically on the original village. City people can come to the village to discover what ancient pastoral and farming times were like and experience and enjoy a style of production and life in general that is completely different from that of an urban environment.



Taoyuan Village before the project was launched.

Photo: Xuesong Zhang

They have actively participated in the land remediation, make related assumptions and suggestions, and develop and create brands whose characteristics optimally reflect the potential value of Taoyuan Happiness Green Village. These brands represent different products and industries of the Village, such as tea, vegetables and country tours. On the basis of earlier demonstrations, projects such as cultivating native protospecies of rice, Beijing Termite Mushroom, Shaanxi Rose, functional vegetables, etc. are now being started in batches.

Public participation is an important aspect of land remediation. However, it is hard to avoid conflicts of interest in the process that may lower expectations. An appropriate legal framework for measures is therefore essential. Stable multi-participation mechanisms must be set up to reach multilateral consensus. Safeguarding the interests of all parties involved is a vital prerequisite for land remediation.

The case of Taoyuan Village shows that carrying out an integrated remediation of ancient villages not only has to improve agricultural production conditions and optimise the dwelling environment and living conditions of the villagers. Sufficient attention also has to be given to renovating and promoting an ecological landscape as well as to the inheritance of traditional cultures. Based on the above principles, the villagers have the opportunity to “see the mountains, watch the waters, and retain the nostalgia”, and to fully realise the concepts of “green development”, promote the construction of a new countryside and a beautiful China and achieve a unification of ecological environment protection and rural comprehensive and balanced development.

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