Designing Urban-Rural Interaction: an Ethnographic Case Study of Design Harvest

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Abstract: Social design has come to the fore in the past decade in convergence with social innovation, social entrepreneurship and design thinking. Despite the momentum of social design, the complexities of social design projects are often oversimplified in final publications. This thesis is an evaluative study of a real-life social design project titled Design Harvest in Shanghai, China that aims to address the imbalanced urban-rural development in the Chinese context with a bottom-up social design approach. To unravel the potential complexities involved in the processes and develop a better understanding of the “bottom-up” design approach boasted by the project, I take an multi-sited ethnographic approach to investigating its on-going process. I conducted participant observations and over 30 formal and informal interviews on Chongming Island and in other field sites. By representing specific time, places, and people that are related to the Harvest project in one way or another and illuminating the complexities inherent in the collaborative and political processes, I contribute to a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of social design and social innovation. I put forward the following conclusions and suggestions for future work with social design and innovation in China. The development of social design project depends on the context it is situated within, which itself keeps evolving. Developing a strong reflective practice while being attentive to the specific socio-cultural context, the different interests and concerns of multi-stakeholders as well as the potential changes at various levels may help anticipate the future and manage the uncertainty involved in the process. Working with social design involves constant negotiation with differently positioned actors and the ability to improvise, adapt and resolve conflict is paramount. I conclude that from design anthropological perspectives, design is an assemblage, a coming-together of the temporal, the material and the relational. Social design is a collaborative performance that never ends.

Keywords: Social design, sustainable development, urban-rural interaction, negotiation
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Summary: Social design has gained momentum in the past decade as means of pursuing social justice and sustainable development in convergence with social innovation and entrepreneurship. To better understand the processes of social design and social innovation projects, this thesis evaluates a real-life social design project titled Design Harvest in Shanghai, China. The Harvest project was initiated by a design faculty in Shanghai in 2007 aimed at addressing the imbalanced urban-rural development in the Chinese context through the design of innovative products and services in a village on Chongming Island in suburban Shanghai. I investigated the on-going process of the project through ethnographic fieldwork where I conducted participant observations and over 30 formal and informal interviews on Chongming Island and in other field sites. I narrate the lived experience of the people once or still involved in the project and put forward the following conclusions and suggestions for future work with social design and innovation in China. The development of social design project is greatly context-dependent. Learning from past experience while being attentive to the specific socio-cultural context, the different interests and concerns of multiple stakeholders as well as the potential changes at various levels may help anticipate the future and manage the uncertainty involved in the process. Working with social design means that the professional designer is often confronted by the conflicting interests between various stakeholders and the ability to improvise, negotiate and resolve conflict is important. Establishing mutual trust and aligning interests is central to the successful implementation of social design and innovation projects like the Design Harvest.

Keywords: Social design, sustainable development, urban-rural interaction, negotiation

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1. Introduction

“Design is a powerful force in shaping material culture, societal values and human behaviour (Ericson and Maze 2011 p.11).” While design typically operates in service of clients’ ideas as a service profession, contemporary designers have been increasingly engaged in critical practises to challenge assumptions, instigate debate and facilitate change in a wider societal context (ibid.). This criticality and change-orientation inherently aligns socially-engaged design with the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development, which calls for transforming current modes of production/consumption and moving towards a peaceful, just and inclusive society (United Nations n.d.).

While social design in its broad sense has embraced a diverse range of approaches and political positions in varied historical contexts (Armstrong et al. 2014, p.17), the emergence of social design as a term in the past decade has converged with the momentum of strategic design, design thinking and social innovation and entrepreneurship partially fuelled by “austerity politics and policy shifts towards open or networked governance” (ibid., p.7). This entanglement with neighbouring disciplines like social innovation and entrepreneurship determines the nature of ‘social design’ as a “discursive moment” (ibid., p.16) rather than a clearly-bounded concept. Not intending to delve into the various ways of conception, I hereby adopt Simon’s (1996) classic elucidation of social design as the frame of this thesis because of its succinctness and suitability for my research case- a social design and social innovation project titled Design Harvest in Shanghai.

In The Sciences of the Artificial (ibid. p.139), Simon approaches social design from social planning perspective and defines design as “devis[ing] courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.” In this light, Design Harvest concerns the imbalanced urban-rural development in China in the past and present and takes a “bottom-up” social design approach (Reuterswärd 2013, Foreword in Lou, Valsecchi and Diaz 2013) to changing it. Yet despite the conciseness of this definition, social design is inherently complex. As Simon notes, taking society as its client (ibid., p.153), social design is entangled in the complexities of human affairs (ibid.,p.140) and faces issues of representation and uncertainty (ibid., p.141).

A similar view is shared by editors of Design Act (Ericson and Maze 2011), who state:

“Design that operates in the public realm and toward societal change raises questions of ethical accountability […] Interpreting, learning, mediating, negotiating, deliberating and advocating in relation to multiple constituencies, the design role might seem akin to that of investigative journalists, community organizers, social workers or politicians […] Because design intervenes in such substantial and enduring ways- transforming values, actions, behaviors and aspirations of stakeholders […] the critical issue for socially and politically engaged design is to query whose interests are represented and served, who benefits and who profits from design action. Beyond a thorough self-reflexivity, socially and politically engaged design asks how new relations or conditions are generated (or if others are merely assimilated and domesticated).” pp.112-114

Since I was intrigued by the combination of these notions “bottom-up”, “social design” and “sustainable development” as claimed in the Harvest project, the overall objective of this thesis is to develop a better understanding of what a bottom-up social design approach to sustainable

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1 See Design Act for theoretical discussions and cases of contemporary design practices engaged with political and social issues.
development could mean in the Chinese context. Specifically, I would like to explore the potential complexities involved in the Harvest as hinted by Simon and the editors of *Design Act* by asking: What could social design look like in action? What types of complexities are involved in the various processes that comprise the actions and design? How are those complexities performed and negotiated? These questions have been my departure point for researching social design through this real-life case study Design Harvest.

2. Design Harvest: a social design research case

Design Harvest (henceforth Harvest) is described as a social design and social innovation research project based in Xianqiao Village on Chongming Island in sub-urban areas of Shanghai, China (Lou, Valsecchi and Diaz 2013). Situated in the Chinese context of intensified urban-rural distinction and sustainability challenges of rapid one-way urbanisation and socio-economic impasse in rural areas during the past 30 years, the project was initiated by a design faculty in Shanghai, China and attempted to apply strategic design thinking (Brown 2009) to exploring a new relationship between the urban and rural areas. It started its initial research phase since 2007, began on-the-ground work in Xianqiao Village in 2011 and is still on going.

My research of the Harvest project takes place 9 years into the project, representing specific time, places, and people that are related to the Harvest project in one way or another. The thesis starts with an introduction of the contextual background of the Harvest project, followed by literature review on social innovation and the analysis of the Harvest project book *Design Harvests: an acupunctural design approach towards sustainability* (Lou, Valsecchi and Diaz 2013). The analysis of the book is meant to provide an overview of the design research phase of the Harvest project that forms the foundation of my field research. Then I will introduce the methodology and methods adopted for my fieldwork, followed by the results and analysis of field materials. The field materials are comprised of two parts: 1) the history of the project since 2011 and 2) stories from my fieldwork. It ends with an overall discussion and conclusion.

In the following section, I provide a short historical overview of the urban-rural relations in China for a deeper appreciation of the socio-political context that the Harvest project is situated within.

3. Background

3.1 Contextualising Design Harvest: Urban-rural distinction in China

Rural communities in the industrialised world have encountered common challenges like an aging population, the retention of youth, limited opportunities for socio-economic development, the decrease of natural resources, loss of local services versus increasing costs of living (Duxbery and Campbell 2011). Yet the imbalanced development between urban and rural China has been fabricated with other socio-political factors that distinguishes the situation from Western contexts. By tracing the historical transformation of urban-rural relations since late imperial China, Park (2008) argues that the clear urban-rural distinction in socio-economic and cultural dimensions only became salient during China’s modern transition from late 19th century to early 20th century. The migration of gentry-literati class from the countryside to the city in pursuit of urban dreams dismantled the urban-rural continuum that had maintained the communication between urban and rural areas in traditional China. The downfall of the gentry class in the country was “acutely represented as the impossibility of communication not only between the young and the old as two temporal categories but also between the two spatialities of the urban and the rural” (Tang 1996, p. 171, see Park 2008).
The gap was further widened after the founding of People’s Republic of China in 1949 when an urban-biased development strategy was adopted by the state that prioritised the primitive capital accumulation in urban industries at the cost of collective agricultural production under planned economy (Wen 2013; Norman, Ye and Wang 2010). Accompanying this development policy is the institutional apparatus named hukou, a household registration system that differentiates urban residents and rural residents to control population mobility (Park 2008). While the urban dwellers are entitled to various benefits including subsidized housing, guaranteed employment, education and health care, rural inhabitants are confined to agricultural production, earning their living based on work-point system in collective agricultural production (ibid.). As Potter and Potter (1990: 296, in Park, 2008) poignantly noted, “The distinction between rural and urban dwellers in the People’s Republic of China has been made the basis for classification into two caste-like status groups, a higher status group called ‘urban personnel,’ and a lower status group called ‘rural personnel.’ Membership in either group is inherited from the mother, assigned at birth, and cannot be changed except under the most extraordinary circumstances.”

With the inception of market economy in the reform era in 1978, the collective agriculture system in the rural areas was replaced by Household Responsibility System aimed at galvanising agricultural productivity by contracting out collective land to individual households. The price of agricultural produce was increased and the state control and procurement abolished (Norman, 2010). Another change brought about by the reform was the development of manufacturing and service industries in rural areas, many of which functioned as the subcontractor of urban-based industries (Norman, 2010, p.5). The increased agricultural productivity and employment opportunities in small enterprises as well as the expansion of market transactions greatly revitalised rural economy, increased rural household income and re-established the link between urban and rural areas. Yet the promising development and the converged trajectory between the urban and rural areas didn’t last long. As the initial positive wave of the reform ebbed, the withdrawal of socialist welfare in the rural areas and the inequality engendered by the privatization and market relations impoverished a high proportion of rural population (Norman, 2010; Park 2008). Based on a comprehensive review of statistics data of the reform era, Keidel (2008) argues that since mid-1980s, the lowering of food prices has been used as part of the policy tools to manage the fluctuation of national macroeconomic cycles. As an unintended consequence of the long-term implementation of this policy, the urban-rural gap in per capita consumption returned to the pre-reform level.

Meanwhile, the past 30 years of reform witnessed the rapid urbanisation process and the mass migration wave of rural population into cities, generating the so-called “floating workers” in cities and “empty-nest households” in the country. Rural areas become increasingly impoverished and stigmatized as “backward” (Taylor 2001). Liang’s (2008) documentary literature based on the narratives of people’s life in her hometown-a rural village in central China Liangzhuang vividly renders the problematic situation and the great ambivalence confronting rural China during the ongoing modernisation process.

While the issue of urban-rural integration has been frequently addressed by the state with the rise of New Rural Construction movement, Lou (2005) argues:

“China’s modern planning practice and theory have seldom paid adequate attention to the countryside. The entire planning system descended into the countryside as an unquestionable

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2 With the emerging urbanisation and rural development agenda of the state, this policy is starting to change. Rural residents can now be granted urban hukou under certain circumstances.
authority, with experiences acquired from the cities or based on stereotypes of the rural society. When this practice became institutionalized, rural areas were either turned into miniatures of cities, or simply ignored. Especially when the term urbanization becomes synonymous with development, the village’s values, lifestyle and code of conduct are neglected further."

It is within this historical context that the Harvest project set out to explore an alternative path other than one-way urbanisation and “to provide a new paradigm of rural development” (Lou, 2013) with a bottom-up approach. Given its nature as a social design and social innovation project, I review relevant literature about the concept of social innovation and then analyse the Design Harvest project book through the lens of social design and social innovation as the foundation for my field research. The literature review will also inform the methodology for my field research.

3.2 The concept of social innovation
Despite the growing vitality of social innovation in the past decade as embodied in various forms of innovative products and services (Murray 2010), social innovation as a concept has historical roots. Having traced the genealogy and historical representations of social innovation over the last two centuries, Godin (2012, p.39) for instance argues that the origin of social innovation dates back to the nineteenth century when it was associated with socialism and social reform. It resurrected in the late twentieth century in reaction to the hegemonic technological innovation in Anglo-Saxon world and the state institutions in France. Jessop et al. (2013 p.110) captured this difference between the historical legacy of social innovation and its contemporary forms in their survey of social scientific literature on social innovation, stating that there is a marked discontinuity in social innovation literature between the ‘old’ tradition focusing on theories of social change and the renewed interest in practice-oriented social innovation analysis since 1970s. In other words, while the ‘old’ school approaches social innovation from a macro-social perspective, recent scholarship on social innovation commonly interprets it in market-economic terms (ibid.). Hence the close association between social innovation and social entrepreneurship in the past three decades.

This historical overview clearly delivers the message that the meaning of social innovation is dependent on the specific historical context. In contemporary contexts, the “social” of social innovation often embraces a normative connotation with notions like “social needs” or “improvement”. Yet this normative view has been challenged. Drawing on their practical project experiences from the European welfare context as well as academic research, Brandsen et al. (2016) call for a sympathetic as well as critical perspective of social innovation. They caution against a commonly assumed normative view that equates ‘social’ with anything inherently positive or good. Neither does the term ‘innovation’, they argue, prescribes the virtue of its evolving goals and meanings (ibid.) Nicholls and Murdock (2012) share a similar view about the essentially ambiguous and contested nature of ‘innovation’ and ‘social’ while noting the ever-changing context that any social innovation project is situated within. Martin and Osberg (2007, See Nicholls and Murdock 2012, p.4) go further by arguing that rebalancing the unjust social structures often requires multiple interventions, disruptions and oppositions. In this sense, “social innovation is never neutral but always political and socially constructed” (Nicholls and Murdock 2012 p.4).

This interventionist approach and change-orientation inherently aligns social innovation with social design. That said, I draw on social innovation literature in contemporary writing, especially those from entrepreneurship and management community with a practice-orientation when analysing the Harvest book.
3.3 Analysis of the Harvest book through the lens of social design and social innovation

The Harvest project claims to take an acupunctural design approach to addressing macro-level sustainability problems through exploring local solutions. They argue that “given China’s enormous size, even a small project, if in sufficient numbers, can have global implications” (Lou and Diaz 2013, p. 52). In this sense, the project is an example of what Young Foundation’s terms as the type of social innovation that “takes forms of replicable models and programmes” (Mulgan 2007, p.8). The notion of sustainable development in this book is based on the three-pillar framework put forward by Kahn (1995), which includes ‘economic sustainability’, ‘social sustainability’, and ‘environmental sustainability.’ These three aspects of sustainability are further integrated and contextualised in the ideal urban-rural relations symbolised by the Chinese metaphor of Yin/Yang, which emphasises a holistic view of the relationship between the urban and the rural in economic, social and environmental terms. Specially, the project identifies its goals as increasing interactions and exchanges of resources, capital, talents and knowledge with a broader urban population while “preserving a specific rural experience and identity” of Chongming.

As depicted in the Harvest book, the design research of the project takes multiple approaches including desk research, fieldwork and workshops for generating innovation ideas. Urban consumers and local villagers were identified as potential users of the products and services to be developed in the project. As the book states, it “aims to network villages on the island to Shanghai, based on the needs from both sides”. Specifically, ethnographic field research was conducted to understand needs and concerns of users from both sides. In the village, it takes forms of mapping community-assets as well as household interviews and observations, which is a common approach in community-based action research and social innovation projects. In the city, research takes forms of workshops with the use of ethnographic design cards for learning about consumers’ needs and their understanding of healthy and organic food (Lou and Diaz 2013, p.102).

“Next, needs have to be tied to new possibilities” (Mulgan et al. 2007 p.21). The ideas gathered through the process were analysed and built into storyboards and prototypes. More than 30 international workshops were conducted with the involvement of foreign students, design consultancies, researchers and entrepreneurs. While this international collaboration generated enormous challenges in administration and communication as noted in a student’s thesis report, the global links also allow them to learn lessons and share ideas (Mulgan 2007, p.33) in an early stage. The constituencies represented in the design synthesis map cover different sectors of the civil society. Stakeholders including entrepreneurs, volunteers, industries and villagers were engaged in the participatory design processes in the format of workshops.

Through the lens of social design and/ or social innovation, the project exemplifies a collaborative social design process in which multiple stakeholders are involved and represented. Various prototypes and future scenarios are created. Eventually, a multifunctional Design Harvest Greenhouse as a “planting, education, exhibition, catering, communication, and event venue” was constructed and a B&B hostel was renovated from a farmer’s house for rural tourism and hospitality experience. Organic farming was practiced in their farmland for delivery of healthy food to the city of Shanghai through farmers’ market. These designed products and services exemplify the integrated approach of sustainable development in the context of urban-rural relations in that organic farming enhances environmental sustainability while the development of rural tourism based on local culture holds the potential for integrated social-economic sustainability.
But, as the director of DESIS network Manzini (2016) argues, every design project “exists both in a physical-biological world…and a social-cultural world”. While the life of artefacts in the socio-cultural world can be easily discussed, the same cannot be said about emerging design.\(^3\) The results of emerging design project are “complex, hybrid, dynamic entities, and we do not yet have language for talking about them, history to compare them with, or until now, arenas in which to discuss them” (Manzini 2016). In an Editorial piece of International Journal of Design, Chen et al. (2015) also note that the outcome of social design projects are ambiguous and unforeseeable”. A similar view is shared by Ehn (2013, in Armstrong et al, p.19), who comments that the conversation and relationships instigated by a social design project can be “on-going beyond the ‘life’ of the project itself”. Thus the evaluation of the impact of social design is very difficult.

What methodology and methods would be qualified for taking up this challenge of an evaluative study of the Harvest project? Drawing on their experience of socially innovative cases against social exclusion in European cities, Haddock and Tornaghi (2013, p.271) echo other researchers’ suggestion that more attention should be paid to contextual factors that any innovation is embedded in. Specifically, they call for a historically-grounded approach that takes into account socio-cultural models and institutional change for understanding the dynamics of change over time and an in-depth ethnographic approach to investigating the ‘making’ of social networks (Haddock and Tornaghi 2010, p. 28).

Inspired by their call for historically-grounded approach and emphasis on contextual factors, I take a qualitative, ethnographic approach to allow a contextualised understanding of the “bottom-up” social design approach boasted by the Harvest project and to unravel the complexities involved in the processes. The following chapter present the methodological approach, site selection and field research process.

4. Methods

4.1 Methodological approach

As a researcher, I embrace the epistemological assumptions of an interpretative paradigm in that I believe in the “social construction of reality.” For researchers working within this paradigm, meanings or knowledge about reality are “situated” in and affected by various contextual factors including the social, political, cultural context and individual background. Meaning is negotiated through interactions rather than fixed. In presenting the research results, I tend to present poly-vocal texts that represent the multiple constituencies involved instead of one single story (Schensul and LeCompte 1999, p.49).

Doing a process-oriented evaluation study of a single social design case, I am concerned with answering “how” or “what is going on” questions in the intervention process (Robson 2007, p.181) rather than taking the “official” view. Especially since the outcome of a social design project is

\(^3\) Mazini defines emerging design as “a problem-based, solution-oriented design, the defining characteristic of which is not the products, services, and communicative artifacts it produces, but the tools and methods it uses… a design that, more or less consciously, is gearing up to operate in the phase of transition. A very clear statement on the nature of emerging design, and of its present limits, was proposed in 2014 in a manifesto titled “DesignX”, [http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/designx_a_future_pa.html](http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/designx_a_future_pa.html)

\(^4\) Klein and Tang (2013, in Design Harvest, p.67) suggest that social design impact evaluation should “measure the impact of rule systems, basic assumptions, processes, and instruments. This would then allow the understanding of social design as fundamentally in-development, an existing result of negotiation.”
complex and hard to evaluate, an interpretative and experience-based approach may shed better light on the complexities involved in the processes than any quantitative approach (ibid., p.182).

4.2 Site selection
The following sites marked in the map are selected based on my overall research questions and specific inquiries formulated during fieldwork. My fieldwork took place from March 7th to May 10th 2016 during which I moved between these sites listed on the map. In my fieldwork, I stayed in my relative’s place 1.5 hour away from the main field site of Xianqiao Village by bus and commuted everyday in the first half of my field stay from March 8th to April 15th, including some days spent in Shanghai. The second half of my field stay from April 24th to May 10th was mostly spent in the village, with some visits to Shanghai and other places on the island for interviews. The accumulated time spent in Shanghai and Chongming Island was seven weeks.

The major site of this project is Xianqiao Village, located in the central part of the Island of Chongming. I did most of my fieldwork there because most events and activities of the project happened there. Other sites where I did interviews and observations are:
1. Tektao Company, the previous investor of the project, where most project staff work.
2. Tongji University, where I did my interview with Lou and observed some design works of students.
3. Open Your Space Design Exhibition in Siping Community, Shanghai.
4. Fangcundi farmers’ market and Nonghao Farmer’s market, Shanghai.
5. Dadong Village on Chongming Island, where the bamboo-weaving craftsman lives.

Source: google map: https://www.google.se/maps/@31.4700624,121.6071394,10z
Research activities at different sites are summarised as follows.

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<th>Location</th>
<th>Research activity</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Research activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xianqiao Village, Chongming Island</td>
<td>Participating Observation of workshops, daily encounter</td>
<td>Tektao Company, Shanghai</td>
<td>Observation of 2 group meetings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Interviews with group members</td>
<td>Tongji University, Shanghai</td>
<td>Interview with Lou</td>
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<td>Interview with a team member</td>
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<td>Siping Community, Shanghai</td>
<td>Observation of Design Exhibition</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Informal interviews with community volunteers</td>
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<td>Fangcundi Farmer’s market</td>
<td>Observation</td>
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<td>Interview with the former site manager</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dadong Village, Chongming Island</td>
<td>Informal interview with the bamboo craftsman</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Qianjin Farm, Chongming Island</td>
<td>Informal interview with the beekeeper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Research Process

4.3.1 Access

Before conducting my fieldwork, I made contacts with the professor Lou who initiated this project through email and Wechat (Instant Messaging app) to negotiate access for my research. I sent out the first email in November 2015 expressing my interest in doing a follow-up study of the Harvest project as my thesis project and immediately received a positive reply. Though I did not take his suggestion of becoming part of the project team out of the concern that this positioning would affect my research integrity, I received the permission from his side to do a follow-up study of the project. I arrived in Shanghai on Friday, March 4th, 2016 and spent two days in the areas around Tongji University, visited a community-based space-making exhibition and made some observations and informal interviews. Since I wasn’t able to get hold of Lou who granted me access to the site during that weekend, I went to Chongming Island on March 6th and visited the project site on my own on March 7th. Luckily, I met a designer from Tektao company who happened to be there for repairing a B&B hostel in the project. After a short round of self-introduction, she gave me a tour of the greenhouse and the hostels in the project, and then referred me to the new General Manager Ding who was due to come to the site the next day.

On March 8th, I came to the site again and introduced myself to the new general manager Ding, informing her about my background, interest in this project, my initial research questions and the ethnographic approach I would take. She seemed quite occupied but kindly granted me access, permitted my audio-taping of group discussions and gave me a brief introduction about the new phase of this project. She was a bit concerned that my field stay would be too short to address my research questions and that I wouldn’t be able to participate in the big event they were about to organise in the end of May. I admitted my time constraints, implying that I wouldn’t be able to work as an intern but would be willing to take pictures for them and help out whenever I can and/ or when it is desired. Self-introduction to other team members was done at different time points and in slightly different ways when they came to the village in the following days. On the locals’ side, I
introduced myself as a student working on my master thesis about this project when I met them personally in later encounters during my fieldwork.

4.3.2 Fieldwork methods

- **Follow**

  Marcus (1998) suggested a way of configuring multi-sited ethnography by “follow.” Through “follow[ing]” the people, thing, plot, metaphor, conflict etc., links and connections between different field sites can be traced to compose an ethnography of the system. While due to various constraints, I wasn’t able to literally follow the movement of people and things in my fieldwork as initially planned, a flexible approach of “follow” under various circumstances provided me valuable insights about the micro and macro context of the project.

  ‘Follow the people” was used intensively during the first two weeks after entering the major field site, Xianqiao Village, and more selectively in the later period. Since the project team was reshuffled before I went for my fieldwork and the new members were just about to navigate themselves through this new phase when I arrived, following the team members in the first two weeks enabled me to update my understanding of the project together with other new team members. The strategy also proved valuable in the sense that I was able to know most of the locals directly involved in this project by being part of the team and participating in most of their daily activities. This was a conscious choice made considering the rumour that people in the village generally don’t welcome researchers. Making the first acquaintance by showing up with the team members would ease my future access to the locals and establish the preliminary trust. Based on the knowledge gathered through “following” in the first two weeks, I was able to formulate an updated systems map of the project, in which I identified my research participants and areas of preliminary investigation.

  “Following” the previous site manager during his two visits to the project site in later period remained the most powerful experience in my fieldwork. The deep relations he established with the local villagers demonstrated by their interactions was emotionally touching and analytically illuminating in light of his interview accounts. It is also the distinct views and attitudes between the previous site manager and the new manager that directed my research to exploring the operational differences between the past and the current phase of this project and people’s different values and assumptions behind this transition.

- **Participant observation**

  As a concept and method central to cultural anthropology, participant observation has been theorised by writers and used in ethnographic studies in various ways (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, p. 16). With its oxymoronic nature of participation/observation and the inherent tension of insider/outside experience, the actual practice of participant observation falls into a continuum from observation to full participation (O’Reilly 2005; Spradley 1980). In actual practice, it is a complex act depending on researcher’s “philosophical position, relationship to the group, routes of access and roles adopted” as well as practical considerations (O’Reilly 2005, p.110).

  I adopted participant observation in my fieldwork with varied levels of personal engagement from observation to “active participation” (Spradley 1980, p.58). It served two main purposes in my research. First, I used “participation” to address the issue of “positioning” and “rapport”. While my initial positioning as a new member of the Harvest team was helpful in establishing the preliminary trust between me and the locals, I was aware that it could also affect how the locals perceive my
identity and potentially limit what kind of information they would be willing to share with me. Hoping to get multiple perspectives as possible, esp. from the locals, I developed personal rapport with them by making multiple visits to the villagers’ homes, helping out with their daily work, dining with them and participating in their work in the Harvest project incl. delivering dishes and plowing the land. On the other hand, I also participated in the daily work of the Harvest team to further rapport, learn about the project and observe their practise. My roles in the team are camera girl for workshop sessions, receptionist of hostel guests, mural painting assistant and design researcher etc. As a result of my constantly changing positioning, I had some occasional experience of “observing one thing” while participating in another, which was indeed powerful and illuminating. Second, I used “participant observation” as a data collection tool to supplement interview data. Besides the participation and/or observation opportunities provided by “following” people, I observed some discussions within the Harvest team and two meetings with their future business partners. On the local villagers’ part, some of the aforementioned visits and helping-out sessions were turned into invaluable opportunities for informal interviews. The participation and observation of casual chats and dinner table discussions in the village not only provided naturally rich materials deserving interpretation and analysis but also increased my understanding of the ‘tacit’ aspects of rural culture, which, combined with interview accounts, greatly informed my research.

• Interviews  
Based on the systems map of this project, I conducted around 30 formal and informal interviews with different research participants including previous and current project members, designers, artists and entrepreneurs who have participated in this project, the professor who initiated this project, locals partially hired by this project, locals not involved in the project, as well as Party Leader of the Village Committee, Head of the Village Committee and Head of Shuxin Township government. The format of the interviews depends on the specific social setting and different participants’ preference. Some of these are part of everyday conversations in participant observation sessions while some are more formal, for instance, the ones with the professor, the Party Leader of the Village Committee and Head of Shuxin Township government. Despite their varied levels of informality and depth, all interviews are tailored to different participants’ position and experience with the project.

4.3.3 Data collection  
• Interview data  
To preserve a permanent record that allows me to play back the interviews for analysis afterwards, I audiotaped semi-structured interviews whenever feasible (Robson 2011, p. 300). All semi-structured interviews with Harvest project staff were audiotaped upon confirmation except the one with the township leader who declined the request.

• Field notes  
Depending on the ethnographer’s involvement and actual practice in the field, field notes can be written at different points of time in different styles (Emerson et al. 2011). I compose field notes on a daily basis to preserve the freshness of memory. Whenever it is possible to take notes at site, I make jottings and note down key phrases and quotes with my phone or notebook depending on occasions and expand them into detailed descriptions after leaving the site. When participating in the activities makes contemporaneous note-taking unavailable, I make mental notes and take pictures of actions and compose written notes on my phone as soon as possible after leaving the site, e.g. on the bus back to my relative’s place.
• Visual data

Images

O’Reilly (2005, p.160) summaries three forms that images have been used in contemporary ethnography: 1) images as writing in supplement to ethnographic text, 2) “found” images—the analysis and interpretation of the visual data collected from research participants, 3) creative use of images, which can take various forms as co-constructed images between researcher and the researched for creating joint ethnographic stories or as a data-elicitation tool to spark discussions of an issue at stake etc.

The use of images in my research fit the three forms stated above. 1) I took photos of people’s interactions, the physical environment and other relevant materials to aid with the writing of field notes as well as for supplementing the written text. 2) I collected photos through social media from workshop participants as a form of self-reporting to trace their use of the bamboo baskets after their visit. 3) Photos of the physical environment of the B&B hostel were used as stimulus in interviews to elicit informants’ responses for my research question about perceptions of design. In most interview sessions, I made visual notes and sketches on the spot as a rapid way of representation, stimulus for speech and immediate member-checking. In some cases, it was used as a communication tool when some villagers are illiterate. In some interview sessions, participants were also prompted to make visual illustrations of the model or the thing they were talking about.

• Videos

Two types of videos were made:

1) During participant observation sessions and site visits, video clips were made to document interesting actions/interactions when my action fits the situation and that people don’t mind me videotaping. In other cases when taking out a camera would be too intrusive, I merely observe and make mental notes to be put into field notes later.

2) “One-Shot Video”, born out of Clark’s (see https://www.tii.se/one-shot-video) work with video in design research and participatory design, is a technique that uses a smartphone to create a short video to illustrate participant’s work without editing. With performance theory as its theoretical bedrock, the actual practice of making a one-shot-video depends on the specific context and purpose. In my fieldwork, I made three one-shot-videos with my research participants at the end of interviews to capture the stories that looked significant in a rapid and performative way.

4.3.4 Data analysis

I approached data analysis almost throughout and after the fieldwork following the grounded theory tradition (Corbin and Strass 2008; Charmaz 2000) to generate concepts and analytic themes. It starts from coding of field notes and interview transcripts and takes forms in different styles of memos. The generation of action codes allows the comparison between different actions, accounts, incidents, categories and vertical comparison between data and category.

Specifically, constant comparison means:
(a) Comparing different people (such as their views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences)
(b) Comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time,
(c) Comparing incident with incident,
(d) Comparing data with category,
(e) Comparing category with other categories.
The strategies of grounded theory include:
(a) simultaneous collection and analysis of data,
(b) a two-step data coding process,
(c) comparative methods,
(d) memo writing aimed at the construction of conceptual analysis,
(e) sampling to refine the researcher’s emerging theoretical ideas,
(f) integration of the theoretical framework.
5. Results and Analysis

In this chapter, I present the results and analysis of my fieldwork materials based on interviews and participant observations. Specifically, they address the following research questions that have been iteratively formulated during fieldwork processes.

1) How has Design Harvest evolved since 2011 in terms of organisational structure and stakeholder relations?
2) How is design performed in the Harvest project? What values are made explicit? How are these performances perceived by site visitors, customers, project staff and/or local villagers?
3) How is the urban-rural fault-line reproduced and re-sutured in the interactions between the local villagers and urban residents connected by the project?
4) What main challenges and dilemmas have been encountered in implementing the project?

By answering these questions, I attempt to unravel the complexities inherent in the project processes from temporal, material and relational perspectives of social design and social innovation. By decoding the values embodied in Harvest design performances and the political connotations of the project, I develop a better understanding of the overarching question of this thesis: what a bottom-up social design approach to sustainable development can mean in the Chinese context.

Section 5.1 answers question 1) through a brief review of the historical trajectory of the project from 2011 to 2016, followed by a short analysis in light of practise-based social innovation literature. By so doing, I provide an overview of the project from an organisational perspective. The next section 5.2 addresses the rest of the questions and will be organised in the format of stories from the field followed by analysis and interpretation after each story. In complementary to section 5.1, this part provides a more nuanced understanding of the various processes that comprise the actions and design and offers a glimpse of the complexities involved in the processes. By narrating the project history and stories from the field from different participants’ perspectives, I seek to render as fully as possible the lived experience of those once or still involved in the project and shed light on the socio-cultural context the project is embedded in.

5.1 Design Harvest: an evolving storyline

“Innovation starts by doing things – and then adapting and adjusting in the light of experience.” (Mulgan 2007, p.4)

- 2011-2013: Anchoring

Envisioned as an eco-tourism and rural entrepreneurship platform, Harvest has a strategic goal of attracting young people to run their business in the countryside and to recover a diverse socio-economic structure in the rural area. The anchoring was not easy. As the Harvest report annotated slightly and as Laojia, the first farming manager shared with me, the initial idea was to materialise the prototypes in an integrated multi-functional Innovation Hub. Yet their first attempt to renovate an abandoned factory in the village failed due to the hesitation from investors’ side. As a former member of the research team mentioned, “The investor thought such an integrated development plan in the rural area was too risky.” Their second attempt to renovate a vacant warehouse failed again due to the lack of construction quota and red tape in the application process as confirmed by various research participants. The land of the warehouse they wanted to use has now been converted to a Buddhism Temple to “regenerate traditional culture and attract people” as the Party Leader of the Village Committee Guan put it. After these failed attempts, the Harvest team adjusted the approach. They rented a piece of farmland to practise organic farming, built a greenhouse on the
farmland as a multi-functional event space and renovated a local villager’s house into a B&B hostel for accommodation service. The envisioned Innovation Hub was thus divided into networked solutions, namely, the farmland, greenhouse and B&B hostel as presented in their final report.

Laojia, as one of the new-generation farmers on Chongming island, was hired in 2011 as the first farming manager in the project. He had his own farmland in another town 20km away from the site and visited the Harvest site three to four times a month. They were growing rice, wheat, different types of beans and vegetables at that time. They sold their products through a farmer’s market in Shanghai and also delivered small quantities of fresh vegetables regularly to a few clients in Tongji University. A young man was employed to work at the site on a daily basis and another staff member from Tektao was responsible for planning workshops and events in the greenhouse.

In terms of the stakeholder relations during that period, Laojia perceived it as a lack of mutual trust and consensus between different actors. From Laojia’s point of view, the academic background of the Harvest team and their communication style and mode of thinking didn’t match with a more “socialised” local mode. As he perceived it, the Village Committee and the township leader took an “wait-and-see” attitude. “I feel that they [the Harvest] had no idea about the concerns of the Village Committee and just went to negotiate straight away.” He mentioned the following anecdotes that he thought didn’t fit the “local customs”.

The construction and renovation of the Harvest greenhouse was carried out without consent from the Village Committee. According to Chinese Land Law, the area covered by greenhouses is categorised as farmland and cannot be converted to other use. The wooden platform constructed inside the greenhouse for hosting events thus became “illegal” in a strict sense. Yet the Village Committee only became fully aware when the team had already finished renovation work, they couldn’t do anything about it but warned them not to do it again.

The colourful pots the Harvest used as visual landmarks for the project had a similar twist. To improve the visibility of the project’s location, the previous Harvest crew painted ceramic pots and put them along the main road near the entrance of the Village Committee. Those pots were soon removed by staff from the Village Committee. As Laojia perceived it, “the locals wouldn’t like them”. When I asked the current Party Leader of the Village Committee Guan about this incident, he didn’t show his personal attitude directly but said in a serious tone that they felt strange about those pots and didn’t know why the Harvest crew put them there.

The natural farming practise adopted in the project was not well received by the locals and Village Committee either. Lou, the professor who initiated the project mentioned that the locals spilt pesticide along the brim of their rice farm because “they didn’t dare to spill it inside our farm.” When I brought this incident to Laojia, he said that it was because the weeds were growing so high while the tidiness of the environment was part of the evaluation indicators mandated by the local government. The Village Committee was responsible for keeping the village clean and tidy to pass the evaluation and thus organised people to control the weeds in public areas.

Even Guan, the Party Leader of the Village Committee, suddenly stopped supporting their work at some point. As Lou recalled:

“We realised at some point that Guan was not supportive of our work and we didn’t know why. You just felt everything went wrong. Afterwards we realised that because we asked the locals to provide
service for the hostel ourselves and didn’t consult him. You know as the Party Leader of the Village, he has the power to decide which household could get more money, which less. So later we fixed this.” [I2]

The service provision of hostels also triggered tensions among the locals, as Lou mentioned:

“After we renovated the hostel, we needed to find people to provide service. We urbanites think that it should go to whoever provides better service and we found one. But villagers think that who lives closest should [get the chance]. Then the neighbour of the hostel, he/she, instead of coming to see us, went to argue with the other household, saying that ‘you are reaching out too far.’” [I2]

Since Laojia became increasingly busy with his own farm, he stopped working for the Harvest by the end of 2013. Yuan, the second farming manager of the project came in charge and brought it into a new phase.

- **2013-2015: Transition**

April 30th, 2016. It was the last time they ran the farmer’s market there this year as their contract with this venue was due. At the foot of a grand vertical facade of a modern art museum outside a subway exit in Huamulan Road in Shanghai, five big outdoor sunlight tents were set up. Below the tent sat a long table put together by eight independent stalls covered by a blue cloth. The sellers of the market sat or stood behind the table with their products exhibited on the table. Various kinds of food ranging from fresh salad veggies, handmade jams and red chilly source to traditional-style brown sugar, dried mushrooms and red dates were arranged beautifully along the table with some small bits put in open boxes or plates in the front for tasting. A young girl who had her spot in the middle greeted passengers’s kids in English from time to time and invited whoever came along to “give it a try.” “It’s healthy food from homemade ingredients!” She spared no efforts to repeat aloud the same sentence again and again. A quick chat with the vendors informed me that while some of them were real new generation of farmers who had quit their jobs in the city and rent a piece of farm in suburban areas in Shanghai, others were resellers who participated in the market for various kinds of reason.

I noticed Yuan seated on a chair in the back of tent, looking at his phone desolately. Originally from Beijing, he had been working as the vice general manager in a renowned Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm in Beijing before moving to Shanghai for marriage. He came in charge of the project as site manager by the end of 2013. He defined the nature of the Harvest project as a “social enterprise” and perceived the essential goal of an enterprise as “taking on social responsibility” through different courses rather than “making money out of the course.” The economic goal of the Harvest project is to be self-sustaining from his perspective.

Since he took charge, he reshuffled the business modules by cutting off the previous vegetable delivery part because of the very few number of customers they had in Tongji University and a relatively high maintenance cost. To compensate for the loss of income, they took another strategy--bring people to the land and gain income through natural education activities and workshops. This shift from delivering veggies to organising natural education activities also had another layer of meaning. As Yuan perceived it, the delivery of rice and veggies to the city was merely a consumption process. “They would only know that the Harvest rice is nice without deeper appreciation of the current situations of the rural area, the importance of environmental-protection and why we advocate a sustainable lifestyle”. During tourism off-seasons in autumn and winter
when they didn’t have many guests visiting the site, they would go to the farmer’s market in Shanghai every weekend. It was not always profitable to attend the farmer’s market from a business perspective. As the new general manager Ding perceived it, the value of the Harvest was not realised in farmer’s market because they did not have a competitive edge compared with other sellers who were offering similar products. In Ding’s opinion, the relationship between Harvest and other farmers would merely be competition. “And you have to pay for the toll, the gas and parking fee.” She added. Another team member Lu who volunteered before in the farmers’ market echoed the new manager’s view, “Sometimes not even one bag of rice is sold during a day.” But for Yuan, participating in farmer’s market means something more than business. Though no longer a “formal” participant of the market since he stopped working for the Harvest, he still came to the farmer’s market almost every weekend as a volunteer. When I mentioned that it was not really profitable to attend farmer’s market, he replied that it was more of personal belief. The organiser of the farmer’s market used to be a senior member of an environmental NGO in Shanghai, whose charisma and belief brought people together. Besides, as Yuan perceived it, the farmer’s market was an alternative way to regenerate consumer’s trust that had been long lost in state-regulated conventional food market. It was a place where he felt a sense of belonging.

It was also during his time that they started to live at the site themselves instead of having local villagers take care of the hostel business. The staff composition during his time normally included a long-term employee, one or two short-term interns or volunteers recruited from Yuan’s network of rural development agencies in China, and the designer Lei in Tektao who was responsible for planning activities and came to the site from time to time. Yuan thought it was better to receive the guests themselves because the villagers’ service attitude was not enough given the ambitious goal the project aimed to achieve. When they [Harvest team] received the guests personally, they could “distill” the ideas and visions of the Harvest project to the guests, which could be further spread out through the guests’ social networks.

The third change was the eased tension between the project and the local community. When I wondered how this happened, Yuan paused for a while and simply attributed it to his personal background of growing up in the countryside and prior experience of engaging in rural development activities since college. “I know how to get along with the country people and the local government.” He mentioned his site visit during Chinese new year when he brought the familiar villagers some gifts even though he already resigned his job at that time. “They were all crying when I was about to leave”. He said in a firm tone. “This is what you are supposed to do in the country...It is a society of people. The most basic need of people is not really eating or clothing. It is emotion”. He went on to explain that “in the country, it goes from emotion, reason to law and emotion comes first while in the city, it goes from law, reason to emotion and law comes first.” He suggested not to be too serious with people in the village, demand them with the rules of the company or criticise that “you’re taking an advantage of the rules of the company.” All that is needed is to help out when people are busy or to drop by for a chat from time to time. He labels this as a process of “exchanging emotion”. This is echoed by R, the designer who invested and led the renovation project of the other hostel. As she recalled, the greatest lesson she learned in the renovation process was that “all issues that can be solved by money are simple stuff.” Locals value human relations (renqing) much more than in the city and monetary payment doesn’t guarantee someone’s help. That’s part of the difficulty of working in the rural areas as she perceived it. For Yuan, it is exactly this seemingly “simple” way of communication and relationship-building that made all the difference. Yet by the end of 2015, Yuan resigned his job as a site manager because of
the sudden loss of a family member. Led by the new general manager Ding, the Harvest took another turn.

- 2016: Taking off

“The boss already said, ‘I’d give you one million yuan. That’s it. Not any more’.” The new general manager Ding hit the table hard with her palm facing up. This was the scene I ran into when I eventually arrived at the company Tektao after a three-hour trip from the island of Chongming on March 21st.

Since the Harvest project started its research in Xianqiao Village on Chongming Island in 2007, it has been losing money every year until the previous site manager Yuan came in charge by the end of 2013. The total sales in year 2014 was five times as much as that of 2013 and for the first time in the project’s history, it made ends meet. Yet the limited amount of profit gained in the past two years was nothing compared with the over one million yuan invested on this project as stated in an application document for the Culture and Creativity Fund of the state. The strong statement the new general manager Ding made in the opening signals the transition of the Harvest as a social innovation project from its incubation phase financially supported by the architecture design consulting firm and other funds to a semi-independent phase with limited financial resources to rely on. It has to “make its own living” as soon as possible.

Given this institutional change, the new general manager Ding runs the Harvest with the aim of establishing a mature business model. “I’m pretty much business-minded. I have to judge its business value.” She looked at me frankly and set out to draw the business model on the paper prompted by me. The version of the business model she had in mind at the time was a compound model comprising different blocks including the farm, B&B hostel, activities and experience event. Regarding the farm, she thought it was not as important for them to have their own farm or practise natural farming themselves as to collect products from other farmers given that the products met their standard. In this way, villagers would be encouraged to adopt organic farming and all the superfluous vegetables each household had in their household plot could be incorporated into the Harvest system. They would also collaborate with other fruit farms and aquaculture farms in the village and share their customer resources. For the hostel part, they would sell their creative products in their hostels to gain more income other than accommodation fee. When I was in the site, they already made some cushions and cups designed by their team members. The merit of this business model, as Ding perceived it, lies in that while the different block could complement each other, each of them could also become an independent small enterprise under the umbrella of the Harvest and could potentially be replicated or exported to other places depending on the local resources and their partners. Yet she also admitted that the model was just confirmed temporarily for that moment; it would keep evolving. Since she took over the project, the model had been changed numerous times because she had no idea how to do it at the beginning. “I told them [the Harvest team] that I couldn’t do anything but merely grope across the river by feeling the stepping stones. I don’t know what would happen and you have to follow me. I might suddenly say ‘turn around’ because there are no more stones in the front… you have to follow me to make the turn. Unless you go ahead to feel the stones for me.” Her tone went up and down, rendering the excitement of an ongoing adventure. The aim of a business model, as she perceived it, was profit accumulation. She considered the design of business model very important because only when something became commercially viable could it be realised. “Investors would only spend money on profitable business. If they are willing to invest, it means you are probably doing the right thing.”
The staff composition of the project differed from its previous phase. In addition to several new team members with diverse backgrounds ranging from interior design to anthropology in the company, they also managed to hire young people from the island for the first time in the project’s history. As Ding perceived it, the successful local recruitment was partly due to the unemployment wave in cities during the current economic recession and partly due to the desirability of the jobs she offered. The designer R also told me that in previous years, they looked for locals but did not receive any applications from young people. As I observed and confirmed during fieldwork, the new farming manager S came for this job after the bankruptcy of the ship manufacturing company he used to work with last year. The new hostel receptionist N just finished his military service and came from a relatively affluent family on the island. Compared with the pressure of living in a big city like Shanghai, he preferred to live a more relaxed life and drive to the city of Shanghai for fun during weekends.

In terms of stakeholder relations, Ding spoke about “binding”. She identified consumers and farmers as their main stakeholders and their goal in Xianqiao Village as “to be welcomed by everyone in the village”. She considered the incentives for villagers’ participation in the project to be income/monetary value while for consumers, the trust-worthiness of their products was key. When asked about their relations with the township leader, she replied in a relatively low tone that it was important that their work would “secure the township leader’s position”.

In this period, the Harvest also started collaboration with new business partners in nearby regions and were actively seeking investment and funding from different entrepreneurship platforms. During my fieldwork, they had partners from the city of Wuxi interested in organic restaurant and hostel renovation. They also had partners from Changzhou, a golf club that had their own organic farm. The Harvest staff were invited to design DIY gastronomy courses and natural education workshops for them. They even went to Xiamen in southern China to attend a rural entrepreneurship conference where entrepreneurs and investors from all over China gathered together to explore business models and opportunities. In one of their potential business partners’ words, it was the meeting between “rural development, design and capital”.

- Analysis
Right background conditions make a social innovation more likely to happen (Mulgan 2007 p.33). As Mulgan (2007) noted, “innovation on the ground may be impeded by structures and systems” (p. 34). This point is well reflected in the initial stage of the Harvest project when their attempts to build up an integrated Innovation Hub failed twice due to the lack of capital support and the red tape in the application process. Also, the construction of the Buddhism temple and the Village Committee’s hesitation in the beginning are worth interpreting. It could be that the idea of agri-tourism Innovation Hub is too foreign for the locals and beyond their imagination. Or as Laojia put it, the Harvest communication style doesn’t fit the locals’.

The fact that the Harvest project is developed in conjunction as a comparative case with a similar social design project, the Sud agri-park in southern Milan, Italy, further leads to the question about context. “Any social system comes to be solidified within peoples’ minds in the form of assumptions, values and norms” (ibid. p.18), but how is the social system in China similar to that of Milan? Could it be that the Harvest’s imagination about the rural future is way ahead than what seems relevant or reachable for the locals?

5 The quotes cited in this section are from transcribed semi-structured interviews except the short comments regarding gas and toll for participating in the farmer’s market and this last comment from their potential business partners. These two are from my field notes.
to envision at that specific time? The barrier of people’s mindset is well reflected in the pesticide anecdote about their natural farming practise during the initial phase. Even at the time of my fieldwork, namely, five years after they started organic/natural farming practise in the village, most villagers I spoke to except the younger ones would regard organic farming as unpractical or economically unfeasible. But eventually, some of their original ideas were put into concrete actions in an adaptive manner with their pragmatic persistence (ibid. p.4).

The point about Guan’s changing attitude speaks to the issue of vested interests (ibid., p.34). As the local leader, he has prominent position in the village and takes charge of the resource distribution among the locals. When the Harvest went to the village and bypassed him in search of local service providers, his powerful position and sense of identity was challenged.

The transition that Yuan brought to the project is most significant in the relational dimension. As Mulgan (2007, p.18) put it, “the personal relationships between the movers and shakers in the system create an additional stabilising factor in the form of social capital and mutual commitment.” Yuan’s point about the proper manner and relationship-building inherently highlight the cultural context of the rural community. An ethnography of a rural Chinese village also notes these ‘helping out’, ‘dining’ and ‘drop-by’ as the cultural norms in rural communities. As stated in Fei’s (2006) classic piece on Chinese society From the Soil, the essential characteristic of the rural communities in China is the rule of ritual that regulates people’s behaviour as social norms, instead of law or reason. In a different context, rural art curator Patrick Overton (2012) also notes that “if you don’t do the relationship building, in particular in the most rural and small communities, if you don’t show them that you care for them as people, then it doesn’t matter what you do for them or what you offer them. Or what you get them to do, it will not be valued if it’s not part of a relationship.” Ding, the new general manger addresses the relationship between different stakeholders in a strategic manner. It is about “binding”, as she put it. This directly relates to the significance of the alignment of interests and resolution of conflicts among multi-stakeholders in the scaling-up of any social innovation or social design project. Yet her approach of dealing with stakeholder relations seem to be more pragmatic. While Yuan stresses human relations and emotion, Ding focuses more on instrumental exchange mediated through monetary value. How this new orientation and interpretation of interest would fit the local conduct and what approach would be more appropriate remain to be seen.

The second point about this new transition is the changing institutional context. At company level, the lack of financial viability of the project pushed them to start addressing this problem, leading to a more flexible and comprehensive business model. The changing economic situation in a broader context might also have contributed to the successful recruitment of the local staff. Besides the evolving macro-context, this change also reveals the distinct beliefs of the previous manager Yuan and the new manger Ding. As Yuan made it clear, he considers the goal of a social enterprise as “taking on social reasonability” rather than “making money out of the course.” His participation in the farmer’s market is also motivated by his personal belief without fully considering the financial situation of the project. Yet Ding, the new general manger has a different interpretation of the project and their goal. She perceives the business value as central to the success of this project and the fact that the company stops incubating them means that they have to find investments by themselves. Ding’s management style also highlights the entrepreneurial spirit and the tinkering process vital to all kinds of innovation (Mulgan 2007, p.22). Her adaptation to unknown situations and openness to improvisation not only demonstrate the uncertainty of social innovation projects but also reflect the learning process that couple the changes along the way of all innovations.
Overall, the four phases of the project from 2007-2016 exemplify the scaling-up process of contemporary social innovation/social entrepreneurship practises. As demonstrated by both the four-stage model put forward by Osburg and Schmidpeter (2013) and the six-stage model illustrated by Murray et al. (2010), social innovation starts from problem identification and goes through an iterative cycle of experimentation before it can be scaled up through networks to create systematic change. Essentially, the scaling-up of social innovation relies on the development of a mature business model, which is what the Harvest is trying to achieve at this stage.

![Fig. 2 Proposed cycle of social innovation](image)

(Osburg and Schmidpeter 2013)  (Murray et al. 2010, p.11)

The road ahead is like groping across the river with stepping stones. It would involve “trial and error, hunches and experiments that only in retrospect look rational and planned (ibid.).” But as Samuel Beckett (2006) put it: ‘Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.’” It is this learning process that makes change possible.
5.2 Social design in action: stories from the field
This section presents stories and moments of fieldwork that will be interpreted and analysed in light of relevant literature to address the other three field research questions.

1) How is design performed in the Harvest project? What values are made explicit? How are these performances perceived by site visitors, customers, project staff and/or local villagers?
2) How is the urban-rural fault-line reproduced and re-sutured in the interactions between the local villagers and urban residents connected by the project?
3) What main challenges and dilemmas have been encountered in implementing the project?

5.2.1 Performances of Harvest design

- “Is this a toilet?”
The mural art project in the Harvest project is meant to serve the Countryside Funfair event held by the end of May when people from the city of Shanghai would be invited to experience the designed games and activities at different spots in Xianqiao Village. Murals would be used to mark the different activity spots. The project team made an open call for artists or others interested in doing murals to participate. April 4th. The Harvest received two mural artists Z and T. They are a young couple working as industrial designers in the city of Shanghai. The husband already finished one mural last week and comes again in company with his wife.

The walls assigned to them are two 1.5-meter small walls located in the corner of a household near a small river. Right across the river is the husband’s work, a mural featuring a confused white bear buried by a pile of carrots. When I arrived at the site, they already finished the contours with fine black sketches. I decided to support them and to try out the mural painting myself. I grabbed a brush and an opened a can of green paint, starting to fill green colour in a circle while chatting with the designer Z about the idea behind her work. She said that is was about mushrooms. She liked mushrooms personally. By painting them on the wall, a micro-world is enlarged and people’s perceptions would be transformed. Also, the ‘umbrella’ shape of the top of the mushrooms fits nicely with the triangle roof of the wall.

From our conversations, I also learnt that they would often go out to suburban areas to do some sketches and photography during weekends. As the husband T put it, “it is rather stressful to work in the cities.” Having heard from Ding that I’m writing my master thesis...
about this project, he suggested that I take a look at the difference between Xiangcun and Nongcun and why some villages are cleaner and prettier than others, what process they have to go through. Following this thread, I wondered why he came here to do the mural and if it had anything to do with this comment. “Well”, he hesitated a bit, “My motivation might be a bit different from this. Because I like to draw, and it feels nice to try some big canvas like this. So this is a good opportunity. Otherwise, I enjoy going to the countryside, like you don’t use the phone, you don’t feel that much pressure. It’s a type of getting some rest. Plus it feels great when you finish a painting”. He finished one stripe and stepped back a bit to look at it… Painting the mural attracted attention from neighbours and local villagers who were passing by the spot. A middle-aged motor guy stopped by…He wondered if we were from the university and commented that they [Tongji University] were specialists in design and had done a lot of design in the greenhouse and the hostel…I went on to ask what he thought design was about. He looked hesitant and said in a laughing tone that I should ask the professional designers there. With my “persistent” encouragement, he said that design is “to make things look nicer”. “The most common stuff, once designed, look nice, right? Like this toilet (maokeng). Once designed by you guys, looks different. But actually, it is just a maokeng inside.” He replied loudly as if proud of the spontaneous example he came up with. The toilet he referred to was the room behind the walls that the couple had been painting on. Coming to realise the ‘nature’ of this spot, the designer couple looked dumbfounded. “Is this a toilet? Isn’t it a storage room?” T walked over to the iron fence of the household and looked towards the inside of the room, attempting to identify its ‘nature’. “We only care about the outside. We don’t care about what’s inside.” Z stopped painting and looked at the guy, arguing in an slightly annoyed tone as if the dignity of their work was threatened by the villager’s careless comment. The villager didn't seem to register their shock and went on to confirm that it was indeed a toilet as he used to use it himself. Feeling amused, I turned to T, “wouldn’t your work be more valuable if it makes the toilet nicer?” “Well. You’re quite optimistic.” He replied sarcastically. “But isn’t art to critique?” I went on as I came to recall Kang’s comment in our chat, “I didn’t agree to do the murals when they [the Harvest] asked me because I need a reason to do murals. Why do I want to do murals? What do I want to express through murals?” He mentioned specifically a modern art work, a toilet with only the artist’s signature on it. “My take [on the work] is, art is a form of critique, a critique of ‘what is beauty, what is ugliness’. Why does art always have to be something beautiful.” Kang’s critical attitude is refreshing. Yet at this moment, T seems not to have recovered from the toilet shock and is quite lost in his thought regarding my probe about the purpose of art, “Well. Art…”. He didn’t continue the thread when Z came to discuss with him which blue colour was more suitable for a block of their mural… It was soon lunch time. When we arrived at hostel and were about to park our vehicle, a red tricycle, Z brought up this toilet incident to the new general manager Ding while still parking the tricycle. “Do you know the spot we were painting on is a toilet? A villager just came tell us that it is a toilet…” She looked at Ding helplessly and said in an aggrieved tone. Ding gave an embarrassing smile and didn’t comment. After lunch, I suggested that I do the dish washing while Z insisted on taking the task and said that I could

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6 Both Xiangcun and Nongcun refer to the countryside in Chinese but the former notion renders a nicer image with the sense of ‘homeland’ inferred by “xiang” while the rural “nong” is often associated with the sense of ‘backwardness’.

7 maokeng: the typical toilet in the rural areas symbolising the common image of rural “backwardness” and “dirtiness”.

8 Kang is an artist who came to the village for a renovation project of a pig-shed.

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help them with the mural painting in the afternoon as long as I wouldn’t “despise that it is a toilet.” She looked at me teasingly while holding a bowl under the tap for a wash.

If social design is to devise actions that makes the present social situations into preferred ones, the action of doing murals on a toilet to make it nicer as the villager put it would seem valuable. While a toilet like this is considered as common sense in this local villager’s account, for the professional designers or mural ‘artists’, the rural toilet and its association with ugliness or dirtiness seem to have denigrated their work and annoyed them. The motivation for them to visit the countryside, is to get away from the drudgeries and hectics of urban life and to consume the rural idyll by doing mural painting, sketches and photography. The couple’s view of the purpose of this type of mural art also differs from that of the artist Kang, who has a more critical perspective that goes beyond the format. Yet this idealised rural image reinforced by their actions is challenged by the unexpected encounter with the ‘reality’ of rural life.  

Z and T’s motivation of doing mural painting and their reaction to the toilet seem to be the typical attitudes among urban guests who came to the site. As one of their guests once stressed, she came to the site because of its “closeness to nature” and that kids could get to see the animals and worms in the countryside that were missing in the city. But the most important thing is that they need good accommodation facilities especially good hygiene conditions. “Hygiene conditions” is also the area for further improvement in their customer feedback questionnaires. The villager C who was providing catering service for the Harvest also mentioned that when the professor Lou came to the site with other professors, he requested that “every bowl has to be washed very clean.” She said in a low tone yet empathetically. I didn’t ask how she felt about it but it is clear from these accounts that locals’ definitions of “what is clean” and how it matters are different from the urban guests’ expectations and assumptions. The countryside that satisfies the urban guests’ expectation or imagination is an idealised and sanitised version. Through these spontaneous “debates”, the urban-rural fault line formulated in the past years manifests itself through the distinct assumptions and reactions of hygiene practices between different social groups.

- Eco-toilet drama
  Various types of eco-toilet are reported to have been set up in rural communities in developing countries (Water Aid 2008) for sustainable sanitation. In the Harvest case, an eco-toilet is initiated by Yuan because it represents sanitised rural sustainability with its efficient use of resources and serves educational functions. Yet this “unusual” sustainable sanitation practise challenges and is challenged by the modernist hygiene assumptions held by urban dwellers.

[Image: This is the eco-toilet the Harvest built up in their farmland in front of the greenhouse area.]

9 As a matter of fact, most rural households in this village have already been equipped with flush-style toilets. The maokeng stands outside the main house. That’s probably also why they would consider it as a storage house.
April 14th was an important day for the Harvest crew, not only because it was the opening
day for their newly renovated hostel but also because of the guests they were about to receive.
I’d heard Ding mention them on my second day after entering the site. At that time, the hostel
was still under renovation. Ding asked the construction worker when the hostel would be
ready for business. After getting an estimated answer of May, she became rather desperate.
“May?! My guests from the labor union would have already come by then!” She exclaimed
while frowning. The guests she had been concerned since over a month ago are the officials
and chairmen of a labor union\textsuperscript{10} from a high-tech district in Shanghai. It is a development
district where many pharmaceutical and biotechnology enterprises are based and the guests
coming to the site are part of those high-level officials. To make the deadline for their visit,
Ding and the others had been getting furnitures from IKEA several times in the past month
and eventually finished all the interior decoration the night before.

The guests were late. A group of twelve mid-aged men and women eventually got off a 40-
seat couch near the hostel Lynchet at around 14:30. After giving them a short tour of the
hostel, Ding guided them to the greenhouse where she introduced to them that “Harvest is a
bit different from normal agritainment places”. The point is to “make people from the city
learn more about the countryside by providing them with better experience of accommodation
and space of activities”…

When the guests came out of the greenhouse tour led by Ding, some were looking for toilet.
The intern in the team gestured to a lady dressed in a colourful blouse where the Harvest eco-
Toilet is. After coming out of the toilet, the lady couldn’t help laughing. Ding looked a bit
embarrassed and explained with a smile that they would collect the faeces and retreat them
into fertilisers for the farmland. The lady went on laughing while their Chairwoman lady was
observing a peach tree in front of the greenhouse, commenting in a patronising tone that
“Rural households have the custom of growing peach trees or pipa trees in front of their
house. They are very superstitious.” Hearing the loud laughter from her colleague, the
Chairwoman wondered what happened when Ding, standing on the wooden path, was still
trying hard to persuade the crowd “It’s rather clean, rather clean. No smell at all.” A lady in
blue who had been to the toilet jumped in, saying that the toilet didn’t have water and it was
covered by paddies. “Like a cat…”She started to laugh. “Oh the toilet is here! I found it!”
Another lady from the crowd chanted, seeming to have figured out what the excitement was
all about. The intern pointed to the Introduction Board of the toilet and invited them to scan
the QR code to learn how the toilet functioned while the crowd went on to ridicule the toilet.
One lady put it straightforward ‘I’m not going” while a guy complained that “there is not even
a choice.” “Exactly!” Another lady echoed. “We don’t have this type of toilet in the hostel do
we?” The Chairwomen finally spoke up and turned towards Ding for reassurance. “Eh. That’s
a normal toilet.” Ding smiled embarrassingly, adding that it was only because the flushing
system did not work in the farmland that they had the eco-toilet here. “Don’t you use it during
the night!” The first lady who ventured into the eco-toilet reminded her colleagues again with
a teasing smile.

\textsuperscript{10} Labor Union in China has a different connotation than representing the collective interests of workers in
negotiations. It is part of the Communist Party system rather than democratically-elected or self-organised
group that guards workers’ interest against employers.
• “We just want to harvest”
[continued with the last vignette] After they stopped joking about the toilet, the crowd moved on and stepped on the wooden path in line when the farmer Shi happened to be working in the allotment area in front of the greenhouse… A guy wondered if Shi was planting radish. After Shi replied that it was sunflower, Ding introduced Shi to them, “Mr. Shi would lead us to grow some vegetables tomorrow.” She said in a calm tone as usual. “I really want to harvest. I don’t want to grow at all.” The leading lady who was standing right next to Ding joked loudly while the crowd burst into laughter. Ding smiled embarrassingly and suggested to the leading lady after a short pause, “Chairwoman Zhang, you are welcome to come again in some days.” Another lady in the group echoed the chairwoman’s idea, laughing while saying “You took the words out of our mouths.” “Did I?” The chairwoman exchanged a look with the other lady when the latter went on to say, “All [of us] are more keen on harvesting. We can come again during the harvest season.” The crowd burst into laughter again when Ding attempted to persuade them that “spring is the best growing season.” Surrounded by the crowd of ‘leaders’, she looked rather powerless. Her voice became lower and lower and soon melted in the air…

Later, when I was accompanying Lei from the team with their mural painting, I came to notice a bunch of colourful cards held in her hand. Printed on the card are small icons of various kinds of vegetables.

This is the gardening-service cards created by the design team.

She said that Ding asked her to distribute these cards to their guests when doing the participatory mural painting. Those are designed gardening-service cards: if you grow something in spring, you can come and harvest your veggies in autumn. I liked the idea and followed up afterwards. When I checked with them after coming back from my fieldwork, they already dropped it simply because nobody wanted to grow.

This story demonstrates that there is a mismatch between the design aim of the social design project versus the users’ expectation and users’ actual practice. In this vignette, the new general manager clearly states the aim of the Harvest as a social design project, which is to make people learn more about the countryside by providing better services and experience. The designed gardening cards can thus be considered as a strategy to establish the link between the guest and the site as well as to encourage them to make multiple visits from a business-management perspective. It is also a way to re-negotiate the alienation between production and consumption and to link people back to the land. Yet this designerly imagination or definition of a more sustainable future and their efforts to nudge their customers towards this vision through design materials illy fits the urban dwellers’ eagerness of consumption. A similar situation happens in the following story.

• Sensing the rhythm of nature in the countryside- Hostel Hejing (Rice seedling & well)
On the very first day I entered the site, I met the architect Ruo from Tektao company who happened to be there for repairing the hostel. After a quick tour around the greenhouse area, we walked along the main road leading to a Harvest B&B hostel and she kept telling me about this project and sharing her thoughts on rural development along the way. After five minutes, we arrived at the hostel. It is located near a river and has an open view of a piece of green wheat field in the front, a small fenced garden and a well near the brim of the corridor. The zigzag-shaped white walls in the entrance area and the earth-coloured corridor ceiling made from dried reeds create a rustic ambience that fits nicely with the surroundings. After settling down some issues with the construction worker who was replacing the rooftop of the shower room, she and I came into the hostel where she started to boil water on the kitchen stove while I walked around to look at the different rooms. Not even ten minutes, the tea was ready. She got me a small grey ceramic cup from the kitchen table, poured in some warm barley tea and put a bag of dried date snacks on the dining table. I thought it was good time for some chat and asked if she would like to tell me more about the design of the hostel, especially the shower room. She sat down, sipped some tea and started the story.

R: The overall design of the hostel is to make people return to nature and experience a rural lifestyle, like waking up early and sleeping early, taking a walk and labouring in nature…The shower room was added onto the original house during the renovation phase. I thought, well, now that you come to the countryside, you gotta shower in a special way. So I equipped it with a semi-transparent door, making you feel like you’re bathing in nature. I initially wanted it to be a wholly-transparent roof cause it feels great to be able to look at the stars while taking a shower.(smiling) But then I felt it’s not that safe. What if there’s a peeper somewhere… (laughing). So I modified it into a semi-transparent version…

L: But how did this idea come about? Say, how did you get there?

R: Because I thought, you gotta shower differently in the country than you do in the city. First the environment has to be special. Second your experience has to be special. What do I mean by special experience. That is, (laughing and speaking in a very firm tone after a pause), say,
you can’t take a shower when the day is too cold, right? (laughing) The biggest advantage of living in the city is that you get to live this [convenient] lifestyle at anytime. We wanted to, say, to make people, aware of the rhythm of nature and the temperature difference between day and night. (looking at me) You should also get a strong sense of difference between the inner environment and the outside. And the rhythm of the seasons as well. [10]

She stopped sipping tea and got up from the seat to put on some music in the white CD player hung on the wall. I looked at my phone and asked for the wifi password when she pointed to me their hidden router in the closed space above the cupboard. She said that they didn’t even equip the hostel with wifi in the beginning. All the service they provide is to “pull people away from city life.” “No television, no wifi but stars and the outside corridor space. Then you gotta figure out how to kill the plenty time you get without access to wifi.” She laughed. “That’s interesting.” I echoed excitedly and she went on to say, “But it didn’t work out later on. The guests complained that they couldn’t live without wifi.” While she initially insisted not to have wifi in the hostel, she was persuaded by a guest who argued “you can give me choices but you can’t choose it for me.” “I think, well. Make sense.” She paused. Under the pressure of the slowly decreasing amount of guests and customer complaint, they eventually set up the wifi after running the hostel for one year. They also provided veggie-picking services for guests to pick veggies grown in the yard of the hostel themselves. But almost no guest did it as they would prefer to buy veggies from the neighbouring villager, who, according to Ruo, was eager to promote his business.

I will analyse this story about the designed services in the hostel from the relational dimension of design action and the values manifested through this action. Just as an architect’s pursuit of aesthetics versus a client’s concern about utility may lead to conflict (Simon 1996, p.151), the designer’s ideal in fostering a specific countryside experience through the set-up of the wifi is incompatible with what their customers may seek and/or the practicalities of accommodation service. While the professional designer purposefully sets a certain goal of control, the client reacts to the designer’s plan and seeks to “control” the professional (ibid., 153). Also, “Design is values made explicit”. (see Chick and Micklethwaite 2011, p.18) The design of the shower room can be considered as an example of biophilic design, which refers to “the deliberate attempt to translate an understanding of the inherent human affinity to affiliate with natural systems and processes- known as biophilia” (Wilson 1984, Kelllert and Wilson 1993. see Kellert n.d.) The designed semi-transparent appearance of the showroom and conscious choice of its outdoor location allow the direct connection with the environment. Both the shower room and the wifi setting can be considered as a type of critical design. Dunne and Raby (2011, see Ericson and Maze 2011, p.28) categories design into critical design and affirmative design. While affirmative design "reinforces how things are now and conforms to cultural, social, technical and economic expectations", critical design "rejects how things are now as being the only possibility" and "provides a critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative social, cultural, technical or economic values" to "push the limits of lived experience.” A design case with a critical approach is reported in the design exhibition of Sensing Energy at KTH (Broms 2016). In the exhibition, they envision a way of communal shower in outdoor settings as the critique of the norm of privacy assumed by the current individualised way of living. Through the lens of critical design, the shower room and the setting of wifi in this hostel reflect the designer’s intention to critique the modern lifestyle urban guests are accustomed to and to foster a different type of lived experience. It also exemplifies the normative dimension and nudging role of design that purposefully (re)shapes user’s behaviour towards a certain direction. Though it is not possible to know how people would react to the
communal shower, in the Harvest, the designer’s “manipulation” failed as demonstrated by the complaints from their customers and the compromises they made in the end. Critical as they may seem at first glance, the design of the shower room and wifi setting on the other hand “affirms” the typical rural idyll of “humans working in harmony with nature and the land” and reproduces the conventional image of the rural and the urban environment (Bunce n.d., see Cloke 2003, p.14). Yet this is the designer’s imagination of the rural and the urban that does not resonate with their customers’ needs. Again, this story illuminates the relational dimension of social design, where its materialised interventionist agenda is constantly subject to negotiation with other actors who may have distinct expectations and needs than the designer.

- Invented tradition- Hostel Huami (Honey)

This photo depicts the kitchen of the new hostel Huami where the dialogue about the dish container in the following vignette happens.

It was lunch time on the third day since I entered the site. Ding was cleaning the stove while Shi had just finished testing the new dish washer. Holding a bunch of cleaned bowls and dishes in his hands, Shi turned to Ding: where should the dishes go? “Right there. The empty space below the top of the table on your left side.” Ding stopped mopping the ventilator above the stove and gestured for Shi. Shi squatted to take a close look at the space. It was two connected hollow compartments with a division board in the middle without any inner accessories. Shi reached inside with his right hand to feel the inner part of the surrounding wall and commented that they should attach two roller pulleys on both sides and fix a drawer in the space. “It’s rather convenient.” He said. Lu, the doctoral student in the team echoed while grabbing some tissues from the table, saying that she had the same at home and bought it from an e-commerce platform. Having heard their conversation from the kitchen, Ding bent down to check the space herself, looked up at them and replied in a peaceful tone, “Well. Our designer thought…we don’t add anything there inside. We then hang a cotton curtain from the top. You go about opening the cover and then put in the dishes.” She added that the designer’s point was to “preserve the rustic appeal” as well as “the traditional countryside effect of Chongming island”.

Looking amused by this explanation, Shi grinned at Ding, arguing that it’s not how it works in local villagers’s houses. He explained that what the locals had at home is a type of cupboard with a window screen, the specific type called “wudouchu”. He went on, “You keep the the outer appearance of the house as it is. But you can use modern facilities inside! You see you have all the fridges and electric ovens here. All these didn’t exist before in the countryside. Now you’re talking about preserving traditions. What tradition are you preserving, huh?” He
looked at Ding teasingly while pointing around to the facilities in the dining hall. Ding looked challenged and went on to clean the kitchen without replying.

Shi walked around the dining hall and became interested in the red brick outer walls. He pointed his fingers up and down in the air, commenting with a smug smile that it’d be rather beautiful if they had used old-fashioned green bricks. “What are green bricks?” I walked up with a curious smile. “Well. The green walls that the locals used before when constructing houses. It’s less common now. But [you] should be able to find.” He explained while demonstrating the working process of setting a frame and piling up the bricks. I wondered why he would prefer to use green walls instead of the current version. “Well. You’re doing hostels here. And you want to do vintage style, this [green wall] is what locals used at home.” He said in a dismissive tone as if it was a strange question. Hearing someone calling him from the yard, he rushed out of the hostel.

In this vignette, Shi challenges the notion of “preserving tradition” suggested by the manager Ding. He poignantly points out the inauthenticity of the preserved tradition in that this is not what locals do at home and that the hostel space is fully equipped with modern facilities. In the U.S and European context of suburbanisation, Harris (2000, see Cloke, Marsden and Mooney 2006, p.331) describes this eclectic, contradictory suburban aesthetics as “salvaging’ the material culture of the past by making rural life clean, neat, quaint, and romantic” when “rusty cowbells stand side-by-side in our kitchens with streamlined, chrome-plated Cuisinarts (ibid.).” Schechner (1985 p.42) notes an interesting performance in a different context. In California, visitors to a Wild Animal park are invited to “contemplate the wild animals of the world and strengthen a commitment to wildlife conservation.” While the tour guide repeatedly stresses the authenticity of the park, the lions in the park are given special food pellets instead of being allowed to hunt the other beasts as they do in Africa. Besides, the co-presence of adjacent food stands, McDonald and souvenir shops clearly demonstrates that the pristine wilderness in the park is a staged version that has been domesticated to California culture. While the context of these performances are different, both seek to represent a sense of authenticity, which, however, is an eclectic arrangement of contradictory elements. But why this staged rusticity in the Harvest case? What does it signify?

• “You’ve got nostalgia then” - Hostel Tiangeng (Lynch: Lane in the field)

March 10th, a group of four from Xinhua News Agency in Shanghai and Chongming County government made a visit to the site to cover a report about the development of Chongming Island upon the request of the latter. In the group are the Editorial Chief, a journalist from the News Agency, an official from the County Government and a lady in the County news unit. A mid-aged lady who is the teacher in a town school and works as a volunteer in the Village Committee also joined the group as the local guide. After being given a short introduction in the still-being-renovated hostel Huami by the new manager, they drove to the other hostel Tiangeng and the Harvest greenhouse accompanied by Huang from the team.

When people spread out to check the different rooms of the hostel, the two ladies stopped their paces around a corner. “Look at that! Isn’t this the bamboo screen we had at home before?” The Village Committee lady exclaimed as if having discovered a new treasure, looking up at the wall where an old-fashioned bamboo screen was put up as decoration, “Yeah. Exactly. And this is the old-style wooden storage box most households had. They are using this as a tea-table now.” The lady from the the county news unit walked around and examined the tea-table at her foot, echoing excitedly with a smiling face.
Shortly, people started to walk back and they gathered in the dining room in the entrance area.

“What’s the official name of this hostel again?” The Editorial chief went on, looking smilingly at Huang. “Lynchet/ Lane in the field (Tiangeng).” Huang replied in a clear and serious tone. “Tiangeng?” The Editorial chief repeated the name and pondered when the government official began to laugh. “Oh well, you’ve got nostalgia (xiangchou) then. Haha.”

Looking satisfied with his apt remark, he turned around and stepped outside with all the exuberance on his face.

“Emotions and sensuous feelings from the past are naturally evoked by encounters with “things” (Cross 2015, p.18). Yet the beauty of things doesn’t come from the fact that they are “well designed” or considered universally beautiful (Highmore 2009, p.158). In their study about normal people’s perception of art works, Csikszentmihalyi and their research team (1991) soon come to realise that it is household objects instead of artworks that people find strong attachment to as they are “charged with meaning that conveyed a sense of integrity and purpose to the lives of the owners (See Highmore 2009, p.158).” In other words, things have value because of their sociality and their entanglement with people’s everyday life. As the Village Committee lady told me in our later conversations, the bamboo screens are used for cleansing the grains in rural households in the past while the wooden box traditionally functions as a bride’s storage box when one gets married. When being staged in the hostel in the present, they invoke memories and inherently connect people to the past.

The governmental official captured it succinctly. It is a form of nostalgia. Triggered by the name of the hostel Tiangeng, the government official seemed impressed by the smart connection of the name of the hostel and its symbolic image of rural nostalgia. Since “remembering the nostalgia” was put forward in the Public Notice of the Urbanisation Plan by the state, “nostalgia” has become a popular notion in media discourse. It has been used in promotion advertisements of rural tourism, mentioned in documentaries of the countryside in China, materialised in efforts of salvaging cultural heritage in the rural areas, and appropriated in commercials of real estate projects in the cities.

Nostalgia has been widely written about in sociology and cultural studies. Coined by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688 in western writing, nostalgia literally means “longing to return home.” While considered as a type of disease that ailed few displaced soldiers in its origin, nostalgia has become a symptom of modernity, a historical emotion when most parts of the world evolved from traditional rural communities to city-based industrialised society (Boym 2002). It is a sense of homelessness entrenched in the “permeant state of mobility and transience”, the elusiveness of place and time (Cross 2015) that couple urbanisation, industrialisation and
globalisation. It is embodied in the longing for rural idyll, in souvenirs brought by Russian immigrants to U.S (Boym 2002), in comic books and childhood toys in the age of fast capitalism as well as in relics and artefacts exhibited in museums (Gross 2015). In the Harvest case, the nostalgic tales are told through the designed hostel service, the invented traditional dish-container and the reconstruction of local cultural materials. But material culture, or the things people make and acquire, symbolise social status (Appaudurai 1986). So the question is, whose nostalgia is this?

- Taste and Distinction

According to the first farming manager Laojia who was in charge of the Harvest farmland from 2011 to 2013 and witnessed the renovation process of Lynchet, there was tension between the Harvest team and the landlord in relation to the renovation plan and the renovation style. The villagers were not willing to sign a long-term contract due to the lack of understanding while the Harvest team were insistent in doing the project. And most importantly, the style of the renovation made the landlord feel “insecure” and “worried” because of its mismatch with the locals’ aesthetic taste.

J: [...] When they first started renovation, the villagers were very unwilling. They were like, “What the hell are you renovating here?” They couldn’t accept it. So they didn’t feel safe to hand their house to the Harvest. It could be better now, but in the beginning it was rather harsh. The landlord wasn’t supportive about their renovating the house.

L: Why would the villagers care so much if they are not using the house themselves?

J: Well. Because they thought, the renovation really messed up their houses.

L: So the landlord saw the renovation process?

J: Yeah. They saw it and were rather discontent and even worried in the beginning. Because it doesn’t fit the aesthetic standard of the locals.

L: What is the aesthetic standard of the local like?

J: Well. You know it. If the house is renovated like this, they would be more than happy. [Pointing to the ceiling of his house, which is a typical multi-storey farmer’s house on the island.] [I6]

Laojia’s account about the villager’s discontent with the hostel renovation style echoes in some sense with Guan, the Party Leader of the Village Committee, who confirms the villager’s dislike of the style of the hostel. In the following excerpt from my discussion with Guan about local villagers’ perception of the Harvest project, he used the renovation of the B&B hostel as an example to show that most villagers don’t understand the content of the Harvest project.

L: They don’t understand it?

G: No. Like the hostels they renovated. The villager was saying, “What the hell is that?” He/she didn’t like it. So he/she doesn’t understand it. He/she doesn’t understand the type of idea.

L: What idea?

G: Well. You know. He/she said, “the hostel...looks rather awful. The interior renovation is awful.” It was considered as, backward. He/she considered it as backward. In the villager’s opinion, this renovation style, he/she said, “it’s too ugly, too backward”. He/she doesn’t understand it. Young people actually like this type of style while the villagers don’t. [I5]

In contrast to the rusticity of the Harvest hostels with unfurnished cement floor, purposely designed vintage-style walls and rustic decoration elements without television, the rooms in the hostels run by other local villagers are all nicely furnished with smooth wooden floor,
equipped with televisions and standardised white wallpaper, rendering a typical image of standardisation and modernism. Almost all residential houses in the village are multi-storey houses with an eclectic style of decoration: the use of the Greek-style pillars in combination with typical plants of Chinese-style gardens and grandiloquent golden fences surrounding the yard. The designer R also told me that the neighbour the hostel Hejing found the high cost of their renovation project unbelievable. According to R, what the villagers would like to have if they renovate their houses are “shiny ceramic tiles” that symbolise their imagination about the urban life.

The tension between the Harvest and the landlord brings up a central issue of social design, the potentially conflicting values and interests between different stakeholders. In this case, the distinction of taste adds much tension to their design intervention. Interestingly, while the local villager considers the renovation style of the hostel as backward, most of the guests from Shanghai and the younger generation like the taste as demonstrated in the last vignette. When I asked one lady from Shanghai for her perception of the hostel, she said it felt quite “tasteful” and pointed to a wooden stick used as the lock of a cupboard as an example. Customer surveys and statistics tell me, they are the middle class in China. In his classic *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates how one’s taste of cultural goods like food, music, art work etc. and their consumption as cultural practice are associated with one’s social origin. In other words, a consumer’s position within the social hierarchy influences one’s aesthetic taste, i.e. what is beautiful versus ugly. Similar incidents of the taste and lifestyle differences between the rural newcomers and local rural people have been reported in western suburban context in earlier times (see Cloke, Marsden and Mooney, pp.334-335). Translated to the Harvest case, while local rural households in the village long for multi-storey townhouses that symbolise modernised urban life, urban new comers to the countryside imitate the nostalgic farm life by inventing the rustic dish container, staging the bamboo screen and reusing the wooden storage box. “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.” (ibid., p.3) While the difference of social origin contributes to the distinction of taste of different social groups, the demonstration of taste through the design practice reproduces this distinction and reinforces the urban-rural fault-line that has been configured in the past.

Concurrent with this reproduction of rural nostalgia in various material forms is its consumption facilitated by the commodification of culture in market economy. It takes place in Shanghai where a group of vendors in the farmer’s market turns the making of traditional fermented sweet rice soup typical of Chongming Island into a workshop for urban dwellers to participate and make their own rice soup by paying 40 yuan. It takes place in Wuxi as the new business partners of the Harvest proudly introduced their plan about a long-term open-air traditional market in their mansion-hostel area where the guests could buy traditional food like qingtuan and enjoy the spectacle of artists’ ritual performances. Just as traditional culture is being celebrated in the cities in various commodified forms, the rural area is also implicated in the “society of the commodity” and the “society of the spectacle.”(Cloke et al. 1994, p.171). In this sense, the urban-rural fault-line that has manifested itself through distinct assumptions and practices of hygiene and taste is to some extent re-sutured by the forces of market economy.

- A bamboo-weaving workshop
S slowly parked his tricycle along the small road near the Harvest greenhouse and came in with dozens of pre-made fine bamboo slices in his hand. He is 75 years old and lives alone in Dadong village five kilometres away from the site. He is the couch of the bamboo-weaving workshop held in the Harvest greenhouse. This time, he is couching a group of ladies from a local bank on the island. S sat down on the long bench and started to distribute the bamboo slices while the group took some straw cushions from the long bench, spread them around on the wooden floor and began to observe and follow S’s demonstrations. The bamboo basket he is couching them to make in these workshops is much easier than the ones he makes at home. As Lu, the doctoral student in the Harvest team put it, this workshop version only requires the most basic skills and is easier for their guests to manage.

Since the Italian researchers in the Harvest came across S during their ethnographic design research fieldwork in 2011 and invited him to couch the bamboo-weaving workshops, he has been interviewed and featured in local TV programs several times. When not coming to the Harvest to couch the workshop, S spends most of his day weaving baskets at home. Seated on a little chair in the entrance hall permeated with the smell of bamboo fragments, he moves a small knife back and forth along the long bamboo piece to slice them into thinner pieces without even looking at his hand. For him, it has become a habitual movement. He works for about six hours each day, weaves two big baskets and goes to the local market in the town at 5 o’clock every morning to sell them. When the business is good, he could sell one or two; sometimes, not even one is sold. Since plastic materials have entered the market in the 90s, the position of the traditional bamboo crafts has become increasingly marginalised. The mechanisation of agricultural production has also outdated most of the production and manual processing tools made out of bamboo. At some point of our chat, he stood up and showed me excitedly how to use those outdated tools lying around in his place and asked if I would like to take one piece of them to the Harvest Greenhouse for exhibition. The Harvest crew had already put some of them in a corner of the greenhouse and had also been selling the big bamboo screens in the city of Shanghai. He seemed quite happy about his involvement in the project even though he didn’t talk much. As his son perceives it, “he is happy as long as he gets money.”

• A Biandan Opera Performance
Z came into the greenhouse holding a heavy-looking big luggage in his right hand. He looked around fifty and was dressed in a black jacket. He put down his luggage and gently opened the wrap. A short pair of ladder-shaped red wooden frame came out with its top hinged together to a red board. He put down the “ladder” against the wooden pieces at the entrance of the Harvest
greenhouse and began to untangle some other parts attached to the frame. They were a bronze gong and some connecting bars. He grabbed one of the bars hinged to one half of the wooden frame and connected it to the other and repeated with the rest of the bars. When finished, these wooden bars formed a small platform in the bottom that stabilised and connected the two pieces of the “ladder” by creating a triangle space. He then stood the whole “ladder” up and hang two small gongs to the bars. When standing, the “ladder” was turned into a high chair that can be sat upon bolstered by the triangle-shaped space below. I began to chat with Zh after observing his practise for a while. From our conversations, I learnt that this form of performance was enlisted as the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Shanghai and he was the third-generation performer in his family. His grandpa, inspired by a form of puppet opera from Suzhou, invented this Biandan performance in 1920s and composed the repertoire based on ancient Chinese tales and classic stories. The liveliness of the performance was widely welcomed since then. In 1980s, he started to learn this performance from his father. “That was the golden time.” He recalled. At the time, he would tour around different villages and hold five to six performances a day. Villagers would come out to enjoy the “puppet opera” after hearing his chanting at the entrance of the village. People would chip in money, like ten cent or five cent each and enjoy the opera together. “It was quite good income in the countryside”. He went on to explain that the daily income of a farmer was only 1.2 yuan to 1.5 yuan at that time while he could earn 2 to 3 yuan for each single performance and more than 10 yuan per day. About ten artists were actively performing in the 80s, yet now it is only him. He goes to teach in schools three days a week and is invited for performing on occasions like birthday parties etc. The Harvest team came to know him when he was once performing in Shanghai and invited him to the Harvest greenhouse for performance.

Parents and the Harvest staff started to set up the chairs in rows facing the big screen. Kids were arranged to sit in the front. People were getting ready. He put the high chair in front of the screen, lifted himself up onto the chair, started the introduction and then quickly expanded a red curtain around his body and hid himself in this small space. Within seconds, a little stage with a colourful backdrop was set up above his head on top of the red curtains. The crowd burst out a pleasant exclamation. On the top of the temporary stage was a banner titled ‘Chongming Biandanxi’ (Shoulder-pole performance). The performance started.
to the front to film the interactions…Mediated through the images produced by phones and video cameras, the consumption of this nostalgic performance is soaked with a sense of anachronism when its 80-year-history is collapsed with and re-shaped by the digital technology of the modern age.

After the performance, Z was waiting aside to get his payment from the Harvest while L, the designer from the Harvest was busy preparing for the next activity. I approached Z again and asked about his plan for the future. He replied in a calm tone that since nobody was interested in learning and inheriting his skill, he planned to start his own agritainment business at home.

At some point, a guest came to chat with Z while his daughter was hitting the biandan with a gong. "Ah, we only make noise." The guy laughed embarrassingly after his daughter made a jarring sound. I looked at their spontaneous performance attentively and wandered off a bit. Thirty years ago, it was farmers working on the land who enjoyed this performance as collective entertainment activities. Now this audience group has changed completely. I seldom see any farmer working on the land. As stated in the official document from the Village Committee, 95% of the farms in the village have been contracted out to entrepreneurs from Shanghai or the island. Most villagers take temporary jobs in other places on the island or work in the small factories near the village plus a few working in these large-scale Cooperative Farms in the village. As an old man working in the large aquaculture farm in the village commented in his spontaneous monologue when I dropped by at his place, “There are no people, no people anymore. All the land has been rented by the big bosses from Shanghai. 500mu, 1000mu. All is mechanised…”

While the agricultural production in this village is being rationalised, the Harvest and the middle class from Shanghai are actively engaged in the nostalgic reproduction and consumption of the tangible and intangible culture. Schechner (1985, pp.38-39) developed a framework for analysing how people treat the past based on their anticipation of future. "In a very real way the future - the project coming into existence through the process of rehearsal - determines the past: what will be kept from earlier rehearsals or from the “source materials.” It is through the reproduction and rephrasing of the real or imagined “source materials” and the rehearsal with different participants that multiple versions of the possible pasts and possible futures are being imagined, performed and negotiated. From a performance perspective, these design actions can be considered as a type of “restored behaviour” comprising the processes of rehearsal and/or performance. By staging/recreating the local cultural materials and reproducing/consuming the nostalgic performances, the Harvest invites whoever comes into the site into a rehearsal, a rehearsal of an imagined future that is characterised by a strengthened local identity and regional culture in the globalised world. From this perspective, the bottom-up social design approach claimed by the Harvest represents the urban middle class’ anxiety of preserving regional cultural identity and a fleeting rural past that is increasingly threatened by industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation. This approach is embedded in the commodification of culture in the regime of market economy and materialises itself through variegated design performances.

5.2.2 The Dilemma of the “Organic”

Since 2011, the Harvest has been practising natural farming and organic farming in Xianqiao Village on a small piece of farmland (14 mu) as advocacy for ecological and environmental sustainability. While the state has issued regulations about green/ organic food, the certification process often lacks transparency and is considered hard for small-scale farms to access (Wang et al. 2015). Because of these reasons, the Harvest rice products never enter the mainstream supermarkets.
but are sold through e-commerce platforms and social media accounts like Wechat. Yet the high cost of maintenance especially weeding put much financial pressure on the team. Last year, manual weeding cost 18000 yuan, which was considered too high by the new general manager and the new farming manger Sh. March 17th. Confronted with this dilemma, they had a group discussion in the newly-renovated hostel after lunch in which team members had conflicting views among them.

…

Sh: You claim that it is [organic/ natural farming], but if you don’t have the standards, you can’t raise the price. It’ no use. No place would accept your products.
L: But the products from this farm don’t enter supermarkets like those certified green products. Our customers are not… [cut off by Sh]
Sh: But now the supply is higher than demand. How do you balance the cost and income for this farm?
L: [rather strong tone and speaking fast] Yeah. If you ask me, weeding would cost at least 7000 yuan, not less…Then you deduct the 7000 yuan from the 18000 yuan so you pay 11000 yuan more. While the 11000 yuan is a big amount of money for the farm, it’s not really hard to cover the cost within the whole project. But are we gonna drop our brand and reputation because of the 10 thousand? That’s why I don’t agree with using pesticides. Are we gonna forego the reputation established in the past years?
(Silence)
Shi starts to walk around while L continues with an emotional tone, “Well. I gave it a thought. Are we gonna give it up because of the 10 thousand? That’s what I think.”
Sh: But it’s not 18000 every year. The labor cost keeps increasing. But the price of your rice cannot go further up. [D0]

…

They ended the conversation without a clear conclusion. When I met the new farming manager one day when he was working in the storage room to package rice for the guests arriving that afternoon, I brought up this issue again.

L: How is the discussion about farm management going? Did you guys come up with any conclusion?
Sh: [sighing while putting a bag of rice to the machine for sealing] Well. We try not to use the pesticides…
L: That’s quite ambiguous.
Sh: Well. There are quite many pests these two years. So we’d try manual weeding and [pesticides], both. If it gets better, then fine.
L: So it depends?
Sh: Yeah.

When I commented that it would not be natural farming if he would start using pesticides, Shi refuted that it [natural farming] was all bullshit because the state hadn’t issued any regulations about it.

L: But you know it [whether you’re following the practice or not] yourself.
Sh: As long as there’s no regulation, it’s all bullshit. You can’t test it.
L: But people who have been here know it. And those living nearby know how it is.
Sh: Would you know if someone spills pesticide in the evening? You can’t do 24h surveillance. [putting one package of rice to the sealing machine]
L: But if you do it like this [make use of the loophole], you can’t even differentiate the real from the fake.
Sh: That’s it. [The packaging machine happened to give out a loud burp, I don’t know if it is echoing Shi’s comment or being sarcastic] If you believe in it, then it exits. If not, then not. That’s how it is.

... Shocked by his cynical attitude, I wondered how consumers would perceive the value of organic food. I interviewed one of their rice customers Li. Though he had other motivation to buy Harvest rice, partially it is because of trust. He had visited the site himself twice last year and knew about the production process even if they do not have any organic certificate or even food quality certificate. In contrast, the food distributed through the conventional market regulated by the state is unreliable. “Those certified [foods] use pesticides.”

To learn more about consumers’ attitude on ecological/organic food, I went to Nonghao farmer’s market in Shanghai. It is organised in the central square on the ground-floor inside a fancy department store in a business district of Pudong. Surrounding the central square are different types of food stores: sushi, Thai food, freshly-made drinks from Taiwan… Behind the market into the back of the square is a red-stage for model show while in another corner of the square closer to the entrance are three girls standing next to the promotion stands filled up with stacks of chocolate. The market is shaped in a 4m*7m rectangle comprised of tables where famers and food resellers are seated inside. Exhibited on the earthy yellow table cloth are various kinds of foods: eggs, fresh veggies, rices, grains and processed Chinese hawthorn balls and sticks and of course, books about traditional Chinese cuisine and cultural heritage. Located in the shopping area, this market is quite vibrant. Different kinds of people move around and most passers-by would take a look at the various kinds of food exhibited on the table.

Soon came a young couple who bought two packages of red kidney beans from one vendor. Prompted by me, the guy in the couple agreed to take some minutes for a short chat. He works in a consulting company in Shanghai and frequents organic food markets at weekends. As he perceives it, the prices of those products are not an issue and the demand is huge. Specifically, he said, “Regarding rice, our company used to do some research about the chemical fertiliser businesses in China. They are all problematic.” He lowered his voice. Within this environment, he had to choose some relatively safe channels like supermarket selling imported goods. Another consumer who has become a volunteer in the farmer’s market said that she liked the atmosphere of the farmer’s market where she could meet the producers face to face and it helped to re-establish the link between people and the land. She always bought ecological food from these farmers and treasured the human relations. Yet at the end of our conversation, she expressed a similar negative
attitude, sighing lightly while staring to the front, “We are so poor… our water, land and food are so bad.”

Another girl Y works in a press agency and comes to the market occasionally. While acknowledging the situation of food safety in China, she has a distinct view about the emerging organic food market and the problematic distinction made between “genetically-modified food” and “healthy food” in those markets.

“…Their intention is good. But in the end, it kinda instils a sense of fear in your mind, which is unhealthy itself…If you have to spend so much time figuring out if the food is safe or not, I would say, it is the disfunction of the state…Some of my collages who have higher educational background even search English articles just for deciding which children’s milk powder to purchase [there have been food scandals about the milk powder]…Like you have to know everything to be able to eat healthily…For me, I could afford this with an affluent family… For those relying on low-income-support, how could they live a healthy life if you [set the bar so high]?…Should they eat genetically-modified food if they are told that it is not healthy but have no other option?…”

Soon after she finished the interview, two blue-collar workers came towards the table where I had my seat. I approached them when they were browsing over the eggs and rices on the table attentively. “Would you like to take some?” I asked. “We? We work here.” I didn’t get their point immediately while they went on to say. “How much is the rice? 8 yuan/kg?” “Well. I think it is 12 yuan/kg.” I replied hesitantly. “They are organic rice. That’s why they are a bit expensive.” I added. They told me that the rice they usually buy is only 3-4 yuan/kg. I wondered if they would choose to buy organic ones in case the price could lower to this level. One of them looked at me with a smile and replied, “Even if it is 4 yuan/kg, we could only buy the kind that is 1 yuan/kg.” They walked away towards other stands and soon disappeared out of sight.

While the initial idea of organic farming in the Harvest is to lead a sustainable mode of production in the village as well as to meet the needs of urban middle class seeking healthy food through this designed network, the problematic financial reality in the new phase of the project makes the continuous adoption of this practise contested as shown in discussions within the group. On the consumers’ side, most of their accounts show the lack of institutional trust about conventional food systems, which seems to explain the emergence of alternative food networks like farmer’s market and the demand for organic food provided by the Harvest. In their study about alternative food networks in China, Wang et al. (2015) explore the dynamic multilevel transformation of trust and how alternative food network could regenerate consumers’ trust at an interpersonal and organisational level. Yet Y’s idiosyncratic account offers a provocative interpretation of the food safety issues in China and how the overemphasis and promotion on ‘healthy food’ in these markets may contribute to the reproduction of the distinction between different social groups. While the emergence of these alternative channels offer access to healthy food, the lack of policy support for small-scale organic food producers, the in-transparent state certification system and the price gap between organic and non-organic food make the production and consumption of the ‘organic’ inherently contested and dilemmatic. In this sense, the bottom-up social design approach taken by the Harvest means that as alternative food producers, the users of their service and products are not local villagers or even locals on the island, but middle class in the city of Shanghai who can afford the high price of the organic products. Even with this group, the success of their designed service is restricted by the institutional obstacles in terms of policies and regulations.
5.2.3 The tensions of renovation projects

In the Harvest project, two B&B hostels have been renovated from local villagers’ houses during the year 2011 and 2012. During my field stay, a third B&B hostel just started its business and other two renovation projects were on going with different types of investment. In this section, I will present the two stories of these renovation projects by tracing the history of existing B&B hostels in the Harvest as well as the emerging dynamics of the ongoing projects as I experienced during my field stay.

• Negotiating the spirit of the deal

As confirmed by various interviewees, the rent of the hostel houses charged by the local villagers kept increasing in the past few years. In the case of the hostel Tiangeng, its rent increased from 6000 yuan/year to 10000 yuan/year since it was renovated in 2011. When the former site manager Yuan was in charge, he attempted to stop the increase for fear that the inflation of the rent would “damage the order of the market.” Yet his efforts was defeated by G, the landlord lady’s persistence. A similar case of rent increase happened between the designer/ investor and the landlord of another Harvest hostel Hejing though they dealt with the tension in a different way, leading to a slightly different result. During a lunch chat, I brought up this issue to the designer R who invested on the hostel.

L: Kang (Her artist friend that I know well) mentioned that your landlord kept raising the rent?
R: When we were about to rent it in the beginning, she said ‘Who would come live in this house”? (laughing) She thought that we were about to use it ourselves. Later, she saw that we charged for 1000 yuan or 2000 yuan per night after renovation. She thinks that we’re making money out of her house so she claims her share.”
L: The contract is set for five years?
R: Yeah. But she raised the rent within this period. (cold face)
L: What would you do then?
R: I don’t agree. (firm tone, staring at the table) Because it doesn't make sense at all. Though I’d give her some extra money every year, like 1000 yuan.

While Ruo thinks “it doesn’t make sense”, the landlord of the hostel Hejing has various reasons to justify her intention.

I met the landlord H at a bus terminal in the head town of the island where she worked in an insurance company on the second floor. We found a quiet corner in the big terminal and came to sit down for a chat. Around 50 years old, she looks fit and sane with a short hair-cut and has been busy with phone calls during our talk.

She says she had always wanted to sublet her house because she wasn’t living in the village herself and had houses in other towns. Compared with the other hostel, her house is smaller and doesn’t have the certificate of housing property due to the fact that it was built on her neighbour’s farmland in earlier years in violation of the land use law. In 2012, the house was sublet to three designers in the Harvest project with an original rent of 3000 yuan/ year (250 yuan/ month) plus a small piece of land in the front for 800 yuan/year. It is a five year contract from 2012 to 2017. Two years after the house was sublet, she proposed to modify the contract and raise the rent because she saw that the landlord of the other hostel (aforementioned) raised the rent to 8500 yuan while she herself only had 3800 yuan. She went through a couple of negotiations with the designer over the past two years but
no agreement was reached. In the end, as R mentioned in the above account, they settled this issue in an informal way with R giving her bonus money by the end of the year. H seems satisfied with this result because she got more than what was said in the contract after all. Also, she doesn’t care about raising the rent that much because there’s not much time left before 2017 when the contract is due and everything will have to be renegotiated. She plans to increase the rent to 5000 yuan/ year by then. As she perceives it, her current rent equals less than 100 yuan per room per month while the Harvest team could recover this cost by renting out the hostel for one night.

At some point during our talk, she turned around to search something in her black shoulder bag and took out her contract kept among some paper documents in a small purse. When skimming through the paper contract, the second article caught my attention. It says that the rent can not be adjusted within 5 years.

I pointed it out to her, wondering what it means. “It, it was written at that time that no adjustment shall be made during this period. It doesn’t matter how you, how it goes in the future.” She started to speak at a very fast pace, kept repairing her sentences and diverted the topic to the farmland before eventually mentioning that “the gap is too big.”

L: What gap?
H: You see. The four rooms in the other hostel are rented out for 10,000 yuan per year. Right? I could accept it if it’s a little difference because she has the housing property certificate while I don’t. Right? But the gap is too big, isn’t it?…..

L: With what reasons did you propose to raise the rent?
H: I’m supposed to [raise the rent]. The commodity price keeps rocketing, is it possible that I don’t increase the rent at all?…..
L: I’m just thinking. Now that the contract says that it cannot be adjusted. Why is it possible to adjust?
H: Well. It can be adjusted because I insisted it for two years and asked her to adjust. Everyone adjusts it. Ms.G (the other hostel landlord) signed a contract as well. But her rent went up wth the commodity price…Manager Yuan [the former site manager] didn’t know what to do in the end. He said “It’s said in the contract that it cannot be adjusted, cannot be adjusted”. Well. I said, my contract is the first one in Xianqiao. The price was not that high at that time. But who knows that the price kept rising afterwards. Ms. G’s [rent] has rocketed like that. Makes you feel so unfair, doesn’t it? …
L: Well. I still wonder, how should we perceive the contract. It says… (Interrupted by her injection)
H: You have to view it from another perspective. A contract is fixed (dead). But humans have agency (alive). (suddenly increased her volume with a very serious and loud tone) All issues need to be settled by people. All things need to be done by humans. We don’t rely on contract. It’s fixed. Don’t you talk about contract. Even the regulations, stipulations issued by the state can be changed. Who makes the changes? It’s humans. Who signed the contract? It’s humans. Humans are omnipotent…[115]

Before we were about to end our conversation, she suddenly came to realise that I was not from the university. Her attitude changed dramatically, saying that she didn’t want to have her house renovated initially because she wouldn’t be living in the house herself. She thought it was unnecessary to renovate it as people in the countryside wouldn’t afford the high rent even if it was
renovated (according to her, the designers approached her by saying that renovation would help her increase the housing price). She also disliked the suggestion from designers’ side that if she would lower the rent, they could share with her bonus money if the business would go well. She stressed that it was too unstable while the monthly rent was stable. She also showed discontent about the article which mandated her to compensate for the renovation expense in case she terminated the contract before it was due. She felt that it was an coercive article. But in the end, she agreed to sign the contract because she expected that she would not use the house herself anyway.

While I am quite shocked by her frankness, she does make an interesting point that “humans have agency.” She compares her rent with the other landlord’s and when she realises the gap, she decides to take action. She also gives other justifications for her action, like the increasing commodity price and the fact that the Harvest could counterbalance the cost by renting out the Hostel for one night. Her comparison with the other landlord and the Harvest seems to show a relative view of the sense of justice or fairness. Essentially, she makes the point that contract is too fixed and is not reliable. While the lack of ‘the spirit of the deal’ is commonly experienced by western firms in a relationship-based society like China (Chen 2000), Fortgang et. al (2002) suggest that social contract is essential for strengthening the economic contract. They employ the idea of ‘social contract’ between two or more negotiating parties and put forward a framework constituting two levels of social contract, both centred on expectation. One is the underlying social contract which involves the expectations of the parties about the nature, extent and duration of the agreement, the other is the ongoing social contract which involves expectations about the working relationship, trust, norms for communication etc. In light of this frame, the lack of consensus between the landlord and the Harvest designers when the economic contract was signed weakens the underlying social contract. As the landlord’s account shows, the contract is signed with a sense of conformity rather than autonomy (ibid.) because she doesn’t want her house to be renovated and doesn’t fully agree with the specific clause in the contract. The initial tension between the landlord of the other hostel and the Harvest team in relation to renovation style as described in the last chapter probably also adds to the breakdown of ‘economic contract’ afterwards. Given the nature of Harvest as a social design project, whose success relies upon the collaboration and resolution of conflicting interests among different actors, the construction and maintenance of social contract becomes a critical issue.

- Art, land and power
At the end of the same road where Harvest greenhouse is located sits a to-be artist studio, a new member of the Harvest entrepreneurship platform. Only 50 meters away from the greenhouse, it is expected to become a nice social venue with bars, studios and artistic installations. Though the site is still under construction, the overall shape is there. About 20 meters long, 2 meters wide yet only 2.5 meters high, the main construction looks like a flat rectangular container lying quietly in the vast green wheat field. It is not yet a complete “building” as it merely has walls surrounding each of the 7 connected compartments and a rooftop made of “sunlight board”, a light-weight construction material with its special translucent appearance. The walls of each compartment are purposefully treated with colourless paint, leaving the fine stone grains exposed in the open air. The revealed grey and rough texture gives out a simple and unadorned sense of beauty that integrates nicely with the diluted dark-green surroundings. Standing in one of the compartments and looking outside, you just want to take every minute to immerse yourself in the vast greeness, to feel the sunshine, to greedily breath in the refreshing fragrance of the wheat.
It feels interesting when you relate this poetic to-be artist studio with its former state—a pig shed. Yes a pig shed. Before being renovated as an artist studio, this rectangular “container” used to a pig-shed where the household living next to it kept 100 pigs as family business. According to the owner of the pig-shed Shen, he had been keeping pigs for more than a decade. Though his business suffers from the fluctuating market price of pork, recent years have been quite good. It was not until 2015, when the launch of eco-island program in Chongming Island mandated that all small-scale pig farms be shut down for sanitation reasons that his business came to a sudden end. “Of course I’m not willing to [give up the pig-farm business] in my heart, but that’s the trend.” Though 65 years old, this old man, dressed in a long-sleeved blue working suit, had a sanguine complexion and looked in good spirits. He thought it was not wise to go against the government (Changfandiao) so he started hunting for jobs immediately. Before all the pigs in his farm were sold out, he had already found a new job and began working in another town 20km away from his home. It takes him 40min to get there by electric bike, where he moves between seven construction sites loading/unloading steel pipes and scaffolders for 8 hours. He is allowed to take 2 days off each month and earns a little more than 3000 yuan.

One day, he was approached by the Party Leader of the Village Committee Mr. Guan to not tear down the pig-shed because someone might want to rent it. Shen said he had no idea who would want to rent it, but he didn’t feel surprised about this idea. As far as he understood, Guan was intending to develop agritainment business [nongjiale] in the village as well as to provide the villagers some extra income.

It was the artist Kang who wanted to rent it. As a film-director and the art director of his company in Shanghai, he has been longing for a quiet studio space in the countryside to escape the overwhelming urban life. He hopes that he could work in different places, enjoy a good time with his family and concentrate on the work that he is truly interested in. He came to the site after connected by the former site manager. While compared with other resort areas, there is almost no scenery in this village, the open spirit of the Harvest appeals to him. He likes this site specifically because “you get an open view in both the front and the back.” He said in a typically gentle and pleasant Taiwanese accent. He also wishes that as more entrepreneurs come join the platform and more visitors come, this village will slowly change and the villagers gradually civilised.

They soon settled the rent and signed the contract with the Village Committee as the middleman. It is a 13 year contract because in 2028, the current version of the Household Responsibility System will come into an end and no one knows what will happen with the land contracted to the farmer under this current scheme. Included in their contract is the area of the original pig shed plus a 2.9-meter-wide piece of land in the front and some land to the right. To make the boundary of the construction area clear, Kang marked the total construction area with an iron wire.

Two days before they were about to start the renovation work, Kang went to check the site and was shocked by what he saw. The place of the iron wire was moved and the size of the land in the front cut by half. In complete shock and depression, he went to argue with his landlord Shen. “How could this have happened? Why didn’t you tell me? We’ve already settled the rent.” Kang said in an aggrieved tone. “Oh it happened just yesterday. We are actually about to go talk to Guan. Why don’t you go talk to him instead? ” Kang mimicked the innocent tone of Shen’s wife so vividly that I couldn’t help laughing.
With the rest part of the land, Kang couldn’t fit in his working desks as originally planned so he had to get the land back. Guan, upon their request, went to negotiate. As the Party Leader of the Village Committee, Guan is the person villagers resort to whenever an argument or conflict cannot be settled among themselves. For instance, when one household constructs a new house and runs into an argument with their neighbour about the height of the building, he has to help them come up with a reasonable solution.

From their negotiations, Kang learned that it was the neighbouring household that moved the iron wire because they were discontent with the pig-shed owner. Kang went on, “The neighbour was unhappy because when the pig-shed was being built, the neighbour gave Shen a small piece of land to make it more convenient for him to raise pigs. But now that Shen got the money from us, he didn’t show any gratitude to the neighbour. That’s why the neighbour was so mad. He/she went to argue with Shen and insisted on taking the land back. Shen couldn’t do anything about it so he gave back the land. [O1]”

11 How would someone claim a small piece of land that had been given to someone else a decade ago? Who does the land belong to?

I brought these questions to Shen, the pig-shed owner. According to Shen, this land was owned by the villager collective, meaning that an individual farmer has the right to use the land for farming but doesn’t own the land. He said that the wife of his neighbour gave him the piece of land as courtesy because “she noticed that I didn’t have much land left in the front” when he started his pig-farm business. “Now she comes to claim it back, so I’d just return it to her.” He said. In Shen’s opinion, it was the rent he received by contracting the land that made her jealous. He also thought Mr. Fu (Kang’s family name) made a very wise choice because there are strict regulations on constructing buildings in the rural areas. If it were not for the existence of the pig-shed, which is a legal side-enterprise of rural households, no new buildings would have been allowed to be constructed or renovated on the existing farm land. That partially explains why the land suddenly becomes so valuable. I asked if Shen ever thought of expressing his gratitude to his neighbour for giving him the land, he said that the neighbour’s wife is “our own people (zijiren)” (the neighbour is Shen’s cousin) and that it was reasonable for her (heqingheli) to give him a very small piece of land as 0.1mu. He never thought about thanking her, saying “What happened in the past is past. Besides, she volunteered to give it to me. I didn’t ask for it. Suppose I gave you 100 yuan yesterday, can I claim it back today?” I laughed without answering. He went on to explain the historical context of this “giving”. That was the time when the agricultural tax was still in place. They had to pay for 4 to 5 types of fees and taxes which made farming unprofitable at all. “She even gave away 1mu and 2mu of her land to others because farming didn’t pay off.” He added. I wondered how the neighbour’s wife was able to support herself if she didn’t farm. Shen replied that she didn’t need to because her husband works as a civil servant in the city of Shanghai and could support two persons’ livelihood.

I happened to come across the neighbour when looking for the pig-shed owner one day. The neighbour was strolling around his house and sharing with me about his plan of cementing the land in front of his house. When I asked about the pig-shed, the neighbour said that was invested by a businessman from Taiwan. It was meant for young people and they were not interested. They spent

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11 I made a one-shot-video of Kang’s version of the story after he spontaneously mentioned this story in our lunch chat.
most of their time in Shanghai and took care of their grandchildren for their children. When I asked about the land, he became alert and said that they didn’t rent it because they would like to grow their own veggies. As I was in a rush to leave for Shanghai on the same day, I didn’t get his perspective on the land dispute. But the negotiations were indeed not easy. Guan sat in his office chair with a frustrated look.

L: I heard that the pig-shed project is not going well.
G: Right. (Smacking) We’ve done many negotiations. Hmm.
L: What is it about?
G: Some villagers don’t want to rent out their land, they want to grow their own veggies. Say. They can eat fresh veggies if they grow their own. If they rent it out, they have to go to the town to buy the veggies. Even if you pay them money, they wouldn’t take it. It’s inconvenient to buy veggies from the town, and they don’t trust the quality. So they want to grow their own veggies. Hmm. [I7]

Another time when I interviewed him, the land dispute was escalated. Other neighbours who had their land near the pig shed were complaining that the height of the pig-shed had affected the sunlight conditions for growing their veggies. I asked him how the negotiations went. He said,

“The villagers [laobaixing] are not like what they were before. Well… They see that you’re making money here, they become more demanding. They may charge higher. And they think it’s justified. Now that you are making money here. Well. He…he wants to take a share as well.” [I7]

Guan raised his right arm and rubbed his eyes back and forth with his palm when finishing the last sentence with hesitation. I feel empathic with his situation. As the Party Leader of the small village, Guan is the symbol of authority in the village. He mobilises resources and devotes much of his time into negotiating with the villagers and mediating the conflicts among them. Yet he feels defeated and embarrassed by his people this time.

After several rounds of difficult negotiations between Guan and the neighbour, the neighbour eventually agreed to sublet this small piece of land at three times the regular price. Kang told me that in addition to their discontent with the pig-shed owner, the neighbours also feared that their land would lose its clear boundary after being included in the systematic renovation plan of the pig-shed. That’s why they were not willing to rent out more land and insisted charging a high price. Since the rent had already been settled in the contract, no extra money would be paid by Kang for getting back this small piece of land. As a result, Shen, the owner of the pig-shed had to give a portion of the rent he received to his neighbour.

There are three main issues around the dispute about the land. First is the increased value of the land after it is contracted out to the artist. While in the past it was used for cultivating veggies and could not be traded according to the Chinese Land Law, it is now turned into a commodity that has direct exchange value. While in the past, the deal seems to be a fair exchange for both parties considering the burden of agricultural tax, now it is the pig-shed owner that benefits from it solely. The second point is about the conflicting needs between the artist and the locals. Land for the locals is becoming increasingly important when most of the land in the village has been contracted out for large-scale farm cooperatives. Local elderly people hold up to their land for being able to grow their own veggies because it is not convenient for them to go to the town to purchase their veggies and
the veggies circulated in the market are not safe compared with the ones grown at home. The third notion about “gratitude” seems rather vague as the neighbouring lady could merely be using it as an excuse to take back her land and claim a share of the rent. Yet from a cultural perspective, the rule of renqing (favour), the need rule and equity rule in Chinese culture are derivatives of the norm of reciprocity (Yang 1957). As Fei (2006) put it, it is the indebtedness and the reciprocity process that mediates the interpersonal relations in a closed community. Yet within the context of rapid urbanisation, the reciprocity process between neighbours and fellow villagers is being dismantled. The pig-shed owner never thought of paying back his neighbour, nor did he have the chance to do so as the neighbouring household live in the city most of the time.

All these issues around the dispute about land and rent comprise the complexities involved in designing in the social sector and the unpredictability of how a social design project unfolds in temporal and relational aspects. As more actors join the game and when different worlds meet, conflicting interests surface, activating new rounds of negotiations and revealing the evolving fabrics of ‘the social’. In this sense, the bottom-up social design approach claimed by the Harvest thus involves constant negotiations and the resolution of conflicting interests among the various actors.
6. Discussion

6.1 The meaning of “bottom-up” and “co-design” in Design Harvest

As mentioned in Guan’s account about the renovation style of the Harvest, most villagers don’t understand the content of the Harvest project. This lack of understanding and participation of this project from villagers’ side raises the question about the “bottom-up” approach repetitively mentioned in the Harvest project book. In European Union’s rural development Leader 2 initiative document (n.d.), “bottom up” approach, together with “participatory”, “local democracy”, “concerted management” are categorised as “variants of a local concertation approach and of a collective process whereby a local community can take charge of the future of its own area”. It “allows the local community and local players to express their views and to help define the development course for their area in line with their own views, expectations and plans.” This conceptualisation essentially places the local community in the centre of the development process. Taking this conceptualisation, the renovation of the locals’ house against the landlords’ will and that the renovation style in service of the urban middle class’ taste seem to make the label “bottom-up” unjustified. Yet given the Chinese context wherein most development programs are implemented in a top-down manner by the government, the fact that the Harvest project is a initiative from the civil society seems to justify the so-called “bottom-up” approach. From a strategic systems thinking perspective and given the existing urban-rural distinction in the past 30 years, the approach of attracting people to the countryside and facilitating urban-rural interaction through designing better services and tourism experience seems valid. That said, I argue that the notion of ‘bottom-up’ should be interpreted relatively. In relation to the state, the Harvest might seem to be the ‘bottom’. Yet in relation to the local community, the Harvest project is a design intervention that represents the expert’s or urban middle class’ ideology about how the future could or should be rather than facilitating or empowering the local community to enact their own future.

The conflicting values and distinction of taste between the local community and urban dwellers bring up the ethical question in social design. When multiple stakeholders are involved, whose interests are represented? From a planning or resource efficiency perspective, commodifying the idle houses in the village through renovation projects would increase resource efficiency and attribute them exchange value in market economy. But when locals still want to live in the houses themselves in future, is it ethical to renovate the house without considering the preference of the locals? Should the locals’ aesthetic taste be ignored if it is not in line with the urban middle class’ agenda of strengthening local cultural identity? How to reconcile the conflicting perceptions of lifestyle and distinct values partially fuelled by the urban-rural distinction in the past? These questions essentially demonstrate the political nature of social design and further raise the issue of representation central to participatory (co-) design, i.e. co-design with who? 12

When I bring the issue of the lack of villagers’ understanding of this project to Lou, the professor who initiated this project, he provoked me to rethink about the definition of ‘community’ in this case. He said that he never considered that “the people currently occupying the physical landscape in the countryside should be the only legitimate hosts of the rural areas. [I2]” He maintained that they are not their “subject of co-design” and backed up his argument by resorting to the historical transformation of the urban-rural relations in China, emphasising the dismantling of urban-rural

12 While the Scandinavian tradition of participatory design was born out of the Marxist workplace democracy movement in 1960s advocating for designing technology to support people’s work instead of replacing people, community-based participatory design is a distinctive field beyond traditional workplace studies(Simonsen & Roberston; DiSalvo, Clement and Pipek 2013).
continuum that followed the outflow of gentry and literati-class. (This argument is observed in the literature presented in section 3.1). This further led him to argue that the current monotonous social structure in the countryside should be changed. That is why they built up this entrepreneurship platform to attract young people back to the countryside in the hope of restoring the diverse social structure in the long-run. Their subject of co-design are those “newcomers” to the countryside who “might potentially be there” [I2]. In this sense, the notion of “community” in the Harvest case goes beyond the geographic boundary of the village and includes young people or urban population in a broad sense. While this notion of ‘community’ seems to be in line with the project’s strategic goal of counterbalancing the one-way urbanisation process, Lou’s stance essentially represents a strong voice of elitism. This stance is critiqued by the former site manager Yuan who sighed and rebutted after a long pause when I mentioned Lou’s comment about “the subject of co-design”. He commented, “I think all the ideas of Lou are really good. And he follows the frontier of the policies. He can do things. But he doesn’t have people in his mind. They don’t have… the lowest class in their mind. [I3]” Lou’s elitist stance is also registered in the problem identification part in the Harvest project book where he argues that most rural areas “sunk into ‘apolitical’ apathy” and that people lack the ability to “autonomously develop economically, have difficulty in establishing good public order, are short of the capability to negotiate and to respond in the face of the invading outside interests (Lou 2013. p.19).” Yet this view is apparently distorted according to my fieldwork experience. In contrast to the image of a unconscious puppet as depicted in the Harvest book, local villagers are conscious actors who proactively pursue their interests, some of which are actually in conflict with the interests of the Harvest team as shown in the rent dispute and the land conflict in the pig-shed story.

6.2 Lessons for future social innovation/ social design projects in China

In retrospect, the project would have been more successful if the project team had been more conscious of the local socio-cultural context of the village and more inclusive of locals’ views throughout the process. I hereby summarise the lessons gained from my evaluation of the Harvest project and articulate my recommendation for future work with social design and social innovation projects in China.

Creating synergy and mutual trust by attending to the concerns of different stakeholders and exiting power structure is central to the successful implementation of projects like the Harvest. For the Harvest team, the first two years is a difficult navigation period that involves many trials and errors. The transition from tension to cooperation in terms of stakeholder relations during Yuan’s time reveals the significance of a locally-relevant mode of communication and awareness of local culture. If the Harvest team had achieved a better understanding of the locals’ interests and concerns in their initial negotiations with the Village Committee and the township leader to develop a shared agenda, the Harvest project could probably have been nurtured in a more supportive environment with mutual trust and stakeholder engagement.

The evolvement of the Harvest suggests that the trajectory of social design or social innovation project depends on the historical contingencies that might emerge along the process, adding to the unpredictability and uncertainty of the process. Aligning interests among different stakeholders being a significant part, the ability of the project team to learn from past experience, improvise and adapt to new situations is also central to sustaining the project. Developing a strong reflective practice while paying attention to the changes at national, regional institutional, and community level may improve the team’s sense of control over the project trajectory and allow quick adaptation and reorientation when new contingencies emerge.
Being more inclusive of different social groups’ voices, especially the local villagers’ views and concerns throughout the process may be helpful for the implementation of these type of projects. In some respects, some unnecessary misunderstanding and friction can be avoided. For instance, the friction around the colourful ceramic pots and the construction of the Harvest greenhouse as an event venue could have been avoided if they had consulted the Village Committee beforehand. But on the other hand, the Greenhouse might not have been materialised if the Village Committee did not allow its construction due to the regulations of rural land use. The rent dispute between the project team and the local villagers around the renovated hostels could also have been eased if the villagers’ views of their houses and their preferences of renovation style had been respected in the beginning of the renovation and that solid social contract had been established. Yet in that case, it is also likely that the renovation might never have happened if villagers didn’t perceive the renovation as necessary. Renovating the houses according to local villagers’ taste might also make the hostel less attractive for urban guests and undermine the value of renovation projects for economic regeneration. The contemplation upon these alternative pasts further demonstrates the political nature of the Harvest. The political connotation of the conscious or unconscious decisions made by the Harvest team are twofold: the cultural identity of the rural area is given higher value than the villagers’ preferences of modern urban style; the regeneration of local economy and the macro-agenda of increasing population flow to the rural areas from social sustainability aspect overrides local villagers’ willingness and understanding. Given the existing urban-rural fault-line manifested through the distinction of values and socio-material practices between urban middle class and the local community, the social design approach taken by the Harvest aimed at increasing the interaction between the urban and rural region faces inevitable challenges.

Despite these constraints, future work with social design and innovation projects can be improved by being sensitive to the local context, developing reflective practice and generating synergy among different stakeholders.

6.3 What is design? What does it mean to work with social design?
The constant negotiations and tensions around materials, services and between different actors in the project raise another interesting question. What is it “design” in the end? When does it start and end? What does it mean to work with social design?

While “design” has been approached from various perspectives and disciplinary traditions with differentiated focus on the result, process, socio-cultural context of design etc., I approach design from design anthropology perspectives. Based on the field materials presented above, I would argue that design is an assemblage, a coming-together of the social, the material and the temporal that involves negotiations in all these dimensions. Design is future-making in terms of temporality (Smith et al. 2016). It is the critical reflection upon the past and the present that initially gave birth to the Harvest project. The concrete design actions can thus be considered as the re-negotiation of urban-rural distinction in favour of a more desirable future. The recreation of the rustic dish container and bamboo screens, the staging of Biandan Xi performances and bamboo weaving workshops are all examples of the Harvest designers’ reflexive practise of consciously appropriating or re-inventing material practices to preserve and strengthen local cultural identity threatened by the forces of modernisation and globalisation. Through these social-material performances, a future that is both local and global is embraced and created. In this sense, the design performances of the Harvest echoes Rajeshwari Ghose’s call to Asian designers in the late 1980s for “restoring local confidence in an age when traditional institutions are crumbling fast and benefits of industrialization are yet to trickle down” (1989: 40–41, see Gunn, Otto and Smith. 2013, p.243).
Yet it is not the future in a singular and linear sense, but futures in plural and non-linear terms (Kjaersgaard et al. 2016 p.2 see Smith et al.). All these design performances of the Harvest involve proactive appropriation of the past when constructing a more desirable present and future rather than assuming the future as essentially novel. This plurality of futures also brings the relational dimension of design into view. Implicated in the situated social-material practices of people from different backgrounds, futures, as the presents, are emergent, heterogenous and always under negotiation and contestation (ibid.). While in conventional design profession such as product design or graphic design, designers take a more dominating role in the front end of design processes as idea generators in service of clients, working in the social sector entails the dispersion and relocation of the design agency through social interactions and an extended life of designed artefacts in the evolving relational and temporal dynamics. This is seen in the the friction between the designer and their customers’ complaint about the hostel service, the mismatch between the designer’s intention of linking people to the land through gardening service versus the customers’ eagerness to consume, and the differed assumptions of hygiene between the locals and urban guests. It is also registered in the distinction of taste regarding hostel renovation between the locals and a more broad urban middle class population, the rent dispute and escalated pig-shed conflict between the Harvest team and the local villagers. A contextualised and process-based ethnographic approach to the Harvest project brings these mundane instances and frictions under scrutiny, where the encounters between differently positioned actors with varied backgrounds, interests and interpretations of “preferred situation” challenge the professional view of the ‘designer’ and leave the designer confronted, embarrassed or even frustrated. In this sense, the project’s macro-agenda of designing urban-rural interactions is implicated in the micro-politics of everyday negotiations with materials, with other people and with oneself. For everyone engaged in the collaborative processes, the ability to improvise, negotiate and navigate oneself through the intricate social-material matrix seems paramount.

From a rationalist goal-setting perspective, Simon (1996) used the creation of oil painting as a metaphor of complex design. He states:

“Making complex designs that are implemented over a long period of time and continually modified in the course of implementation has much in common with painting in oil. In oil painting every new spot of pigment laid on the canvas creates some kind of pattern that provides a continuing source of new ideas to the painter. The painting process is a process of cyclical interaction between painter and canvas in which current goals lead to new applications of paint, while the gradually changing pattern suggests new goals (p.163).”

Although the rich interactions between different ‘actors’ in the temporal and social-material assemblage of social design cannot be reduced to rational goal-setting and problem resolution, I would like to borrow Simon’s metaphor of oil painting for social design. I argue that social design is a performance where numerous painters are engaged in co-creating emerging patterns that converge, diverge and intersect on the evolving social canvas. It is a performance that never ends.
7. Conclusion

The research case of the social design and social innovation project Design Harvest takes place 9 years into the project, representing specific time, places, and people that are related to the Harvest project in one way or another. By taking an ethnographic and process-oriented approach, I contribute to a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of social design and social innovation by representing the lived experiences of people involved in the Harvest project and illuminating the complexities inherent in the collaborative and political processes. I put forward suggestions for future work with social design and innovation in China by articulating the following findings. The trajectory of social design and innovation projects is highly dependent on the social-cultural context they are embedded in, which itself keeps evolving. Working with social design involves constant negotiation with oneself and the other where the ability to embrace uncertainty, improvise and make compromises is paramount. By developing reflective practice and being attentive to the specifics of local context and potential changes at various levels, the uncertainty and complexities in the processes can be better anticipated and handled. Given the multiplicity of constituencies involved in social design and innovation projects like Design Harvest, the alignment of interests, generation of synergy and establishment of social contract among different stakeholders is central to the successful implementation of similar social design and innovation projects. From design anthropology perspectives, I argue that design is an assemblage, a coming-together of the relational, the material and the temporal that involves negotiations in all these dimensions. In this sense, social design is a collective performance that never ends.
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