

Behold the Countryside: The Urban/Rural Divide

By Tay Kheng Soon

In Asia's mad dash to urbanization, the countryside has been all but completely forgotten, according to distinguished Singaporean architect Tay Kheng Soon. The tendency to view the urban and the rural as two spaces, not one, is a fundamental mistake. It's time to rethink our relationship to the countryside, he argues.

URBANIZATION IS ONE OF THE “BIG IDEAS” the West has exported. Since the time of Greek city-states, the West has embraced the notion that cities are the crucible of ideas and embody the concept of progress. Cities are symbols of economic power, the arts, military prowess, politics, civic culture, intellectual ferment, creativity and so on. Moreover, urbanity itself is seen as the up-market styling of manners. And so over the past 500 years, first through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, then through the Industrial Revolution, the ascendancy of the West became the very definition of progress and power. Through the power the West accumulated over this period, the “non-West” became subjugated, and intellectually cowed. So the obvious definition of progress for much of the non-West now, including Asia, is to catch up with the West.

CATCHING UP AND THE COUNTRYSIDE

The drive to catch up with the West propels Asian development. This is also reflected in the global dynamics of style, which are reflected locally as the partially digested styles of the globalized upper-classes. These are emulated by the middle-classes and then downwards until the bottom end of the affordability ladder is reached. And so, similarly, “catch-up nations” emulate the styles of their previous colonizing masters as an international pecking order comes about. Not only is style spread this way, but ideas also.

The relative unimportance of the countryside to the industrialized urban economy of the West is because their countrysides have ei-

ther been turned into industrialized farms or picturesque subsidized landscapes. Also, given the fact that the countryside in the non-West already largely supplies the global demand for organic raw materials such as timber, natural rubber, palm oil, cocoa and the like, the West does not “think rural” at all. Even critics of late capitalism in the West are doggedly urbanist. In the footsteps of such aesthetic thinkers as John Ruskin and William Morris, Western intellectual tradition focused almost exclusively on the city as the crucible of history and civilization. *The City in History* by the American historian Louis Mumford eulogized the city as the quintessential cradle of Western triumph. Constantinos A. Doxiadis, the theorizer of urbanization and planner of Islamabad, confidently predicted the sequential rise of mega-cities that would extend into outlying regions as a linked spatial system he called “Megalopolis” and then onward inevitably to become “Ecumenopolis,” making a seamless transcontinental spread of urban tissue over the entire surface of the globe. The concept is the ultimate triumph of urbanism, Western-style, and the ultimate triumph of the urban economy. The countryside, meanwhile, is subsumed totally. Even the arch critics of capitalism, Karl Marx and later Vladimir Lenin, were urbanists at heart when they declared the urban proletariat to be the revolutionary class. It took Mao Zedong to prove the contrary.

But even after the rural-focused political thought of Mahatma Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh and Mao had triumphed in their respective struggles, subsequent developments down played the countryside. Economic development eventually turned to the urbanist developmental ideology of the West. In new non-communist states, even Gunnar Mydal’s developmental prescriptions emphasized the urban economy at the expense of the countryside. Thus, cities became almost the exclusive locus of development in Asia. India held back the longest. Intellectuals in most Asian universities embroidered the mantra of urbanism. Architects, developers, industrialists and urban planners all spoke in terms of the urban context, and in the

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social sciences, urbanism was the focus of attention. In this respect, the social sciences in Asia took their direction from their counterparts in the West. Rural reality was thus jettisoned.

OPPORTUNITY FOR AN ASIAN APPROACH

The countryside was thus left underdeveloped both in the mind and in reality. Now that China, India, Japan, South Korea, Southeast Asia and other parts of the region have begun to catch up, or have already caught up, with the West economically, I believe that there is a new opportunity to shift the developmental agenda to include the rural and the urban as a single space — not two spaces, as is now the case. This is the opportune moment for Asia to take center stage in the field of ideas. Let me explain.

Given the evident environmental impact that “development” has had on the global eco-system and the devastating impacts of climate change, what leadership of ideas can the East offer the world? The West has in many ways finished its development. Their cities are complete. Their countrysides industrialized, suburbanized or prettified. Answers to the developmental dilemma are unlikely from the West. This is the key question for Asia. What can the East offer the world? Even with the most eco-efficient and effective technologies, unless economic and social appetites change, what hope is there for resolving the environmental crisis? There has to be a shift to satisfaction beyond material desire. Can this be engendered beyond the mad consumption that underpins current definitions of well-being and human security? What leadership can Asia give to value all life and the protection of natural systems while accommodating human life within the folds of nature?

The means are at hand. All the necessary technologies exist. Carbon neutral technologies, energy efficient cars, refrigerators, household appliances and passive energy buildings are all available. What is holding us back? Amory Lovins, founder of the Rocky Mountain Institute, blames institutional barriers. Old habits and so-called “restricted mandate boundaries.” Why don’t power generation companies, for exam-

ple, develop energy recovery products, such as generating cold water for air-conditioning, instead of dumping heat into the sea? The answer: because it is not within their mandate.

Assume that we switch to renewable energy sources through a combination of solar, wind, geo-thermal, hydro, nuclear and bio-diesel. Would we maintain business as usual? Perhaps. Algae-oil could replace the fuel at our petrol stations. Bio-gas could replace liquefied natural gas and compressed national gas. Not much disruption in our way of doing business would be needed. The new would use the old infrastructure, and we would reduce our carbon footprint, to be sure. The production of greenhouse gases would be reduced if agreement on outputs could be reached between competing economies. With a combination of increased energy efficiency, conservation technologies, plus the reuse and recycling of materials, the depletion of natural resources would abate. Would planet earth then be saved? Would there be social justice? Would the biosphere repair itself?

These are tough questions. But they may miss the point. The answers may lie in a re-examination of the relationship between capitalism and the city, and between the urban and the rural. Capitalism feeds off of consumption that produces the profits that justify risks and rewards. The discipline of the market is what keeps efficiency high. The growth economy is the outcome of political systems designed to enable market efficiencies to prevail. These can be either democratic or authoritarian so long as they obey market forces.

THE CITY AS SYMBOL

Mega-cities are the product of advanced capitalism, industrialization and the making of the middle classes. The poor “in-migrants” from the countryside are pushed and pulled to the cities to escape poverty or to respond to the lure of upward mobility. This is the general picture. The rise of Asian’s economies proves that politics is subservient to market economics.

But are there undercurrents that make up the complex reality besides economics? Market

economics assumes that eventually material benefits will trickle down to the impoverished masses, thus resolving inequities. I dread to think what will happen to the environment when the impoverished masses in China, India and Southeast Asia attain the standard of living of Asia's middle-classes. The growth model is questionable if it means more environmental destruction. While the problems of greenhouse gases and climate change are theoretically man-

value chain. It is said that this is human nature. Remaking human nature is a failed project when it is undertaken in a big way. Revolutions have not changed human nature. What can produce happiness? That is the abiding question.

Let me report on some experiences of mine in Thailand that begin to address that abiding question. The King of Thailand argues for something he calls the "sufficiency" economy. It strikes a chord within Buddhist Thailand. What it re-

One way to interpret contemporary reality is that there is an imbalance at the root of consciousness and this has produced the world we live in: mega-cities and depleted countrysides, privileged classes, endemic poverty, rapacious demand for natural resources and wanton waste and pollution.

ageable, what about bio-diversity and justice for all living things? What is the biological future of planet earth? Though addressing the misery of the poor is just, it is still no reason to destroy planet earth in the process.

Perhaps the answer lies in asking a different question. What do humans want? Certainly, they want security, shelter, food, family and community — in short, happiness. Everyone knows, however, that there is a plateau beyond which more wealth does not translate into more happiness. Then why does this dream have such a hold on people? I suggest it is because of a lack of real choice. The solution lies therefore in conceptualizing what constitutes real choice. Everyone lives out interim choices. Everyone hopes for something better.

SIGNS OF A PARADIGM SHIFT

Reducing consumption is very hard. The contemporary image of the good life depends on consumption. This is what drives the whole

ally means is harder to define in the context of a market economy that renders human beings as producers and consumers. There is here a poverty of human conception that is endemic to free market proponents. Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammad Yunus states this diplomatically, saying that capitalism has only developed half its potential. It must now develop its capacity for social concerns. Indeed, Yunus's pioneering of the idea of micro-credit proves that there is a huge pool of human energy and enterprise at the bottom of the social pyramid - a point echoed by the eminent management specialist C.K. Prahalad.

Yes, the market can expand downwards, as shown both in theory and practice, but will the rescue of the poor not result in even more resource depletion and pollution? While everyone would wish for the emancipation of the poor, the deeper question of whether our current approach is sustainable cannot be avoided.

This is the greatest challenge to every thinking person and every social and environmen-

tal activist. But there is a paradigm shift to be contemplated. Current politics is a battle over control of the economic process, tweaking its priorities but without any major shift in its assumptions and methodologies — a process of adjusting “who gets what, when and how.”

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

Here, there are lessons from Thailand in the work of the People and Community Development Association (PDA), headed by the noted Thai ex-politician and activist, Mechai Viravaidya and his team of intrepid managers and facilitators. Typically, the way national governments allocate funds, so-called “primate” cities (or major urban areas) get most of the investment capital and infrastructure grants. The countryside gets very little. Given the tremendous voting power latent in the rural areas, however, cunning politicians can pander to rural voters by offering financial gestures. Former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s 1 million baht grants to every village are an example. The funds soon dissipated into consumer spending on TVs and other consumer goods. Similarly, his scheme of offering 30 baht medical care to everyone in the countryside was greatly appreciated, but nothing fundamentally changed. Poverty remained. Indebtedness remained a scourge.

ENTER THE NEW THINKERS

Into this situation, PDA stepped in with a rural development program driven by social idealism and sound business management principles. Each of its programs to improve the life of rural residents is designed as an empowerment process. People’s pride and self-reliance are engendered. Let me report on a few projects of which I have first-hand knowledge.

Four years ago, PDA built a primary school in Lamplimat in the northeast of Thailand, around 450 km from Bangkok, one of the poorest areas of the country. Some 180 students were enrolled through a lucky draw, so they represented a random student profile. Most of the children were from very poor rice farming families from

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surrounding villages. The school has a special teaching philosophy developed by the principal, Khun Vitchien. It is a mix of Montessori, Waldorf and Buddhist educational ideas.

Though the curriculum was the standard Thai National School Curriculum it was the teaching and learning methods that were very different. Each morning the children spent time with the teacher to discuss what they wanted to learn that day. The principal believes that children learn best when they are ready. Every child was given pride of place. Each class had 20 students, one teacher and two trainee teachers. The classes were each equipped with two Internet-linked computers. Previously, the linkage was via satellite, but has since been upgraded to a faster landline. Unlike students from my native Singapore, the children are very self possessed and unabashed with strangers. They take the initiative in cleaning the school and doing farming around the school over and above their studies. They learn English by writing letters to teachers and the principal through the school's internal mailing system. They are taught English in order to give them greater options in life. Choice is part of empowerment. Eco-cultural tourism is seen as a potential source of income for the district and the middle-term aim is to develop this sector of the village economy; good English is key to its success.

Adjacent to the school, I designed and built a village Community Center. Mechai believes parents must be involved in the education of their children. The Community Center, among other things, accommodates the Rice Academy, where the villagers and the children learn about new strains of rice, growing methods and other agricultural knowledge. There is also a craft shop, an Internet café, a library and a radio station. Every afternoon, the primary school students broadcast stories and lessons to surrounding schools. If 10-year old kids can be empowered to do this, what might they not do when they grow up?

This PDA program led to another initiative — the Village Bank. It is a village-based micro-credit scheme. PDA provided the bank

with seed capital of US\$10,000 in return for a requirement that the villagers plant 10,000 trees. The start-up capital, in other words, was money that was earned. The bank has 24 trustees — eight village elders, eight active adults and eight teenagers. These people, selected by local consensus, become the de-facto new leadership of the community, and span the entire age range of the village from youth to respected elders. To be sure, local politics gets mixed up with this process, but nevertheless, it results in a situation where established leaders who owe much to official patronage and entrenched business interests are now in competition with new, emerging leaders. Moreover, gender equality in the new leadership introduces a new element into the local power dynamics.

A key element of Mechai's vision to empower individuals in rural communities includes even an appreciation of the implications of location in making the most basic architectural decisions. Teachers, for example, are a moral and intellectual resource in the district, in his view. Their role goes beyond teaching. When I asked Mechai where the teachers' quarters should be for the new secondary school that I designed — now under construction near the Community Center — his answer was: scatter the houses into the surrounding villages so that a more intimate link with the community can be established.

The secondary school is the logical next step, because by next year the first graduates from the primary school will need to move up the educational ladder. Mechai views the secondary school as “the poor man's university.” Accordingly, in addition to the usual curriculum, the secondary school will have a business program, a design school and courses in hygiene and bare-foot medicine. Of course, it will be a “green” school. Every classroom and teaching space will generate its own electricity through rooftop solar panels. All rainwater will be collected, filtered and reticulated. All solid and liquid waste will be processed on site for bio-gas and compost.

The entire superstructure of the buildings will be made of treated bamboo. In my design

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for the Community Center, I pioneered the use of rammed earth and bamboo. Initially, the villagers greeted my idea of using these basic materials and methods with skepticism, but when they saw the final result, that changed. They fumbled at first with these materials, because they weren't used to using them. A subsequent cost accounting on the project revealed that this approach was 35 percent cheaper than buildings using industrially produced materials. I am convinced we can reduce the costs even further. What I find interesting is what the local prejudice against my approach of using local materials revealed. Bamboo was regarded as a low class material and earth even more so. This fits nicely into the point I made earlier about the hierarchy of international flow-through of ideas into local style-dynamics. I have since proposed to build on adjacent land some eco-houses for wealthy supporters of the project. Once the local villagers see that the rich favor bamboo and earth in beautifully designed homes, a trend will start. The style dynamics will have been changed.

REFLECTIONS ON THE THAI EXPERIENCE

The use of local materials is a strategic issue. Spending on industrial products feeds the food chain and social hierarchy that feeds into the pockets of corporate capitalism in its current prof-

it-only logic. Recycling local capital through the use of local materials ensures economic efficiency and generates local pride. The issue is not one of the villages versus the city. The issue is rebalancing the opportunity costs and the creation of real choices beyond the current scheme of things.

Geography is important. China, India, and Thailand are so-called "deep countries." That is to say, the distance between the big cities and the villages is very large. This is unlike, for example, Vietnam. There the distances are very short. The rural-urban dichotomy is easier to resolve. Still, there is huge over investment in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. A more balanced approach can still be pursued.

How can this dichotomy be addressed? It requires rethinking the nature of cities in an age of information and communications technology. In my view, major urban aggregations primarily serve four key functions. The first is the concentration of the highest level of medical research and treatment; the second is the concentration of the highest levels of academic research and teaching; the third is the concentration of the highest level of media, arts, content development and entertainment; the fourth is the concentration of material culture and shopping. The other functions of a society and economy can be dispersed to the country-

side. Light industry and manufacturing can go to nearby regions or the countryside. Only heavy industry requires special locations close to raw materials and ports.

What sort of landscape is this? It is more like a living web spread over valleys and waterways, co-existing with farms and plantation forests. The web will be punctuated by clusters for education, entertainment and manufacturing. Every settlement is high density but low rise. Spatial efficiency is tied to convenience. Bicycles, bio-diesel buses and walking animate the community spaces and facilities. A simple analysis of available land space suggests the feasibility of such a vision. It only takes a demonstration project to show what is possible. That is the vision that is missing from our current conception of the urban/rural divide.

The urban/rural dichotomy can be resolved spatially but it also needs a paradigm shift of values. The issue is the availability of viable choice. At different stages of life individuals have different needs and perceptions. Moving between city life and rural life will be a natural choice provided the economic and environmental conditions are viable.

The key question is what is the matrix of such a life?

All studies on happiness show that there is a plateau in the relationship between satisfaction and wealth. The possible landscape of life suggested above is premised on the existence of such a plateau. Will corporate capitalism and the market wither away? There is no necessity for this. Indeed, there is a greater need for the stability of investments. Social and environmental benefit is as much a concern of individuals as it should be for corporate entities.

Perhaps the answer lies in neuroscience. This is one of the last frontiers — in addition to the study of the human genome — in the search into human nature. What is emerging in neuroscience is a whole new understanding of brain complexity and plasticity. We are coming to understand that the logical, egoistical and calculative aspects of the human personality exist better when they are in balance with the

holistic, aesthetic and empathetic aspects of the human personality. But under the impact of technology designed to ease the burdens of living, the industrial conception has privileged only one half of human capacity; the left side of the brain processes at the expense of right-side functions. One way to interpret contemporary reality is that there is an imbalance at the root of consciousness and this has produced the world we live in: mega-cities and depleted countrysides, privileged classes, endemic poverty, rapacious demand for natural resources and wanton waste and pollution. Most telling of all is the systemic underperformance of human capacity development. What all this means is the necessity to introduce some urban facilities into the countryside and more nature and farms into cities.

Cowed by the weight of unprincipled politics and burdened by anxiety induced by debt and uncertainty, people lower their sights and expectations to suit the conditions of the life that they have been dealt. A grim and ungenerous vision of reality thus prevails. It need not be so. Cities of Asia, behold the countryside, and imagine the infinite possibilities. See one space, not two.

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