

She Ji for Sustainability

The Chongming Sustainable Community Project

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Abstract: The future of Chinese society depends heavily on achieving a harmonic relationship between the urban and rural, to create new design strategies that build environmental and socioeconomic sustainability. The Chongming Sustainable Community Project is designed as a study approach towards sustainability in China. ‘She Ji’, the Chinese term for ‘Design’ signifies a process fostering complementary relationships between the urban and rural; local and global; government and community; and business and consumer. The formation of a network of supporting projects and resources lead to the making of operational prototypes created through society itself.

Key words: *Chongming, Network Design, Sustainability, Community*

1. From Design to She Ji

The practice and research of Design today extends boundaries further into the increasing complexity of a rapidly changing world. By promoting input from inter and multi-disciplinary teams, connected knowledge is being fostered in the design discipline. Connected knowledge can drive Design Innovation for global society as a path for progressive research and practice.¹ Coinciding, the expanding role of Design can play a significant role in China to change and improve the outlook for its people. A challenge in China is how to stabilize its growth by fostering ways in which people can sustain themselves through exchange with other localities. In China, if innovation for the future can be rooted in the culture of localities, then a Chinese way of design can be established. Hence, Design Innovation in China calls for both new ideas and a renaissance of what can be utilized from the past.

‘She Ji’ is the Chinese term for ‘Design’, originating from the ancient military to establish a strategy.² In this aspect, the Chinese term for ‘Design’ means more than just design. Meta-design strategy or a holistic view of the design process is at the core meaning of She Ji. A broad systems approach used in She Ji can provide a framework that includes all project stakeholders for a society-driven output. A society-driven design process in a sustainable direction may then be called Sustainability, Social Innovation, and Design Innovation. If She Ji in China can be the turning point for rethinking traditional notions of Design, then it may be possible to transform Design into an approach for solutions flexible with change.

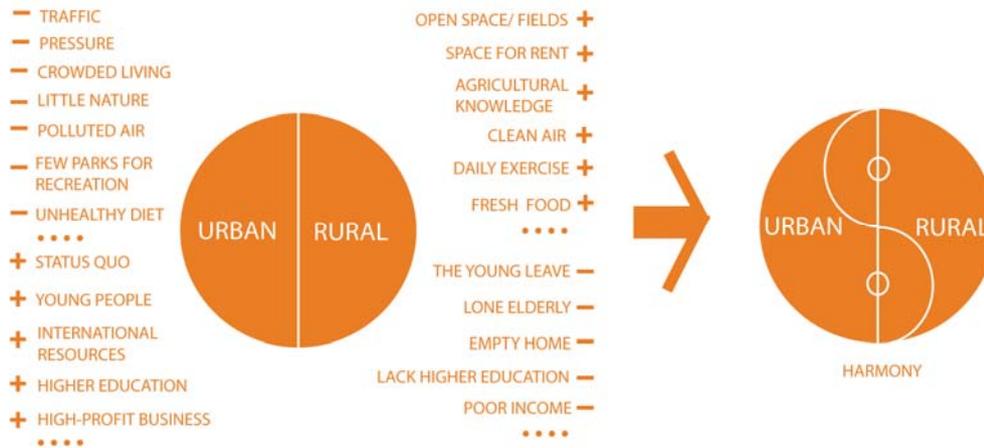


Figure 1. Urban-Rural Factors

2. Chongming Sustainable Community Project

The project begins from the question of how to create a balance between urban and rural areas of China, to solve the problem of unsustainability found in urban limitations and a depleted countryside. Continual migration to city centers from the countryside has left cities overcrowded with limited resources while degrading the status quo of country folk. It can be observed that youth in particular have fled their home villages leaving a primarily aging population alone to sustain localities that are now dying out. This grim and unsustainable scenario is the starting point of the Chongming Sustainable Community Project.

Chongming Island is selected for this project as a readily available location for experimental projects combining local and global resources. Chongming has become an international research hub near Shanghai City for creating models of environmental and socioeconomic sustainability. As a rural area, Chongming's close proximity near a city center makes it an ideal place for seeking solutions between the urban and rural. The villages on the island fit the profile of deteriorated communities caused by migration for job opportunities and higher education in Shanghai City. The island therefore provides a typical backdrop for a design process in peri-urban, rural areas of China. If Chongming can be a research base for applying alternative design processes, such as She Ji, the successful design approaches on a small-scale can be applicable to other localities for a large-scale impact.

In the Chongming Sustainable Community Project, the urban and rural are perceived as complementary to one another in a strengthened totality. (Figure 1) Interaction of the city and nearby rural areas can lead to an exchange of resources while at the same time maintaining the distinct features that differentiate urban and rural localities. The rural area of Chongming can maintain its characteristics that reinforce the island's identity while exchanging business and social services with the city. Through the promotion of exchanges between urban and rural areas, sustainable development can be connected to a global network which is characterized as service-oriented, flexible with change and rooted in local identity. In this process, She Ji becomes a dynamic promoter and catalyst for community development. From a strategic point of view, integration of rural Chinese everyday life in a network of resources can strengthen the communication both inside and outside the island.

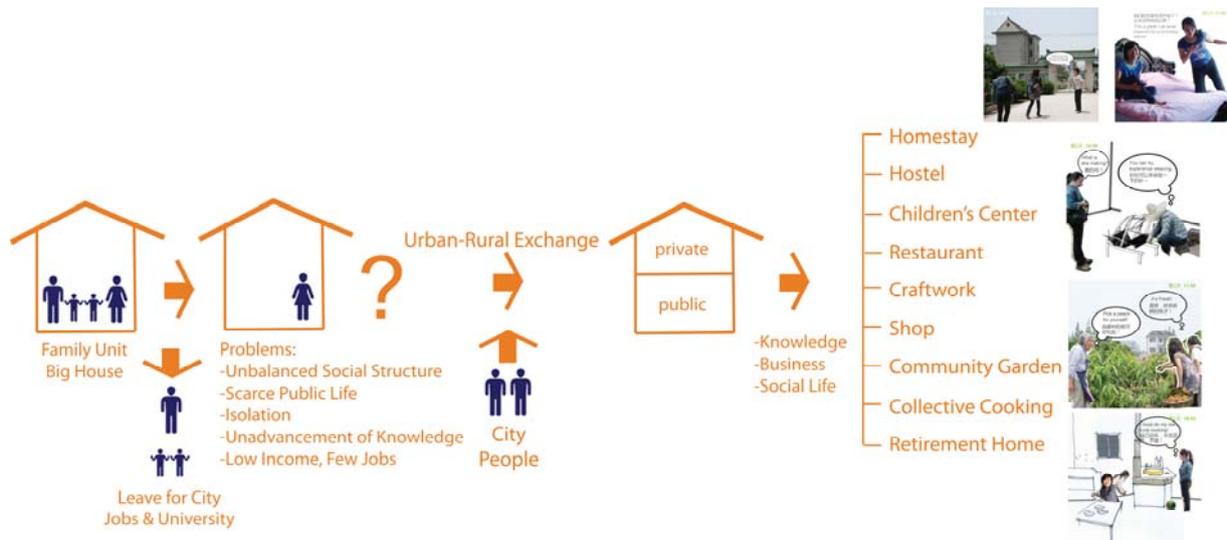


Figure 2. Rural Housing Service Design Subprojects

3. She Ji in the Chongming Sustainable Community Project

Using the tool of She Ji, this project is designed as a system composed by a series of subprojects with different focuses. Each project is a starting point of network problem solving, working simultaneously bottom-up and top-down from the contexts of urban-rural, local-global, government-community and business-consumer. (Figure 2)

The subprojects include the creation of identity stakes and bridging prototypes. Stakes are based in agriculture including city gardens, eco-tourism, or organic food, a creative agriculture park, and research fields. Bridge prototypes include the renovation of a village factory as a creative industry for international and local exhibitions; educational facilities for residents along with research offices for universities; energy efficient kitchen design and products; mobile communication; among many more possibilities. Design is publicly participative and based in the idea of 'designing without a product, as a process or way of living in itself'.³ These projects can be connected as a framework in which each project is overlapped and supported by others.

How the subprojects operate in a network is as the following: eco-tourism brings city dwellers to harvest organic food in the city gardens, supported by the research from universities and facilities in the creative industry. These activities attract the interaction and the mixing of urban, rural, education, and leisure for a unique landscape creating the experience of well-being. This experience is a way of branding an attraction for the co-existence of urban and rural, young and old; leading to a market profit for the community. As an example, a result of the experience may include harvested food turned into products from energy-efficient kitchens that can then be sold back to the eco-tourism market, the city and fair-trade venues. Using existing resources, each subproject relates to another in a chain of interventions or a package of projects promoting sustainability from a socially innovative approach.

Academic and professional resources including those in China and abroad, act in cooperation with residents and the local government to achieve common goals. Stakeholders are co-designers throughout the whole process of design and use time.⁴ The working structure, or the She Ji approach, revolves around the counterbalancing of these design exchanges from both grassroots and planned initiatives, similar to the urban-rural relationship where the components are dependent on one another for success.

4. The re-defined role of the Designer in She Ji

She Ji is about a system, strategy, approach, and action. In a shifting time when designers are rethinking the definition of sustainability, strategy must also be rethought. In order to realize a strategy and action, the designer must communicate and engage outside of the Design realm. By recognizing opportunities, communicating and bringing together parties to share a vision, the designer's role in She Ji is expanded to an agent for networking solutions. The target of the project is a moving one constantly being reshaped and improved. In a sense the flexibility of a working process allows the project and all its subprojects to become diverse solutions for various scenarios within the urban-rural condition.

Solutions derived from a She Ji process are grounded in the reality of members in society to apply the project to daily life. Promoting a lifestyle from daily life applications can improve the future with a large impact. The drive for progression and the swiftness of policy in China makes it a place for experimentation of ideas and new ways of doing to happen.⁵ The designer can use She Ji and the inclusiveness it incorporates to drive the popular mentality towards a sustainable lifestyle. Taking advantage of the China's experimental ground, and reusing tradition into innovation, like She Ji, can ground Chinese people in their own identity for the betterment of their own communities.

5. Conclusion

For the Chongming Sustainable Community Project, She Ji is being used to help people discover, revitalize and create ways of sustainable living and producing. Sustainability is achieved by a She Ji approach of balancing traditional values of living and producing with new opportunities for socioeconomic exchange. With a renaissance of She Ji, China and design in China can form a new role for environmental and socioeconomic sustainability. Maintaining a culture or what people identify with can keep design and development rooted in communities and catalyst human-based solutions to form a network of socioeconomic exchange. As in the Chongming Sustainable Community Project, the components and relationship of the urban and rural find a balance within this network to achieve unconventional solutions. Accordingly, Chinese designers can be rooted in their traditions to infer deeper into how future development is conceived.

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